

Honors Privatization: A Professor's and Three Students' Responses

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

(MICHAEL K. CUNDALL JR.)

Gary Bell's essay raises important questions about the future of honors education, questions that will have the greatest impact on honors students. The voices of those students are not typically included in discussions about the funding and administration of honors even though they have crucial insights to contribute. The primary goal of this essay is thus to include those voices in the discussion, and I will restrict my own comments to a brief introduction and conclusion.

For my part, I largely agree with Bell's essay. The analogy between the privatization of the rail service in Britain and the privatization of honors education that Bell uses to set the stage for the article is apt, but at least one factor seems different: not everyone needs or has access to honors education. Since honors is an opt-in sort of venture, one might argue that the free-market model would be beneficial to good and effective honors education. However, the market model has the opposite effect in higher—and especially honors—education. The market pressure on colleges and universities to better their graduation rates can result in pressure on faculty members to pass students and thus decrease the rigor of an undergraduate education. Further, as baccalaureate degrees become more prevalent, students also feel pressure to market themselves with special distinctions, choosing to join honors because it looks good on a résumé and creating an environment readymade for exploitation.

My perspective as an honors administrator and faculty member thus rests on my concern that a market-based agenda can easily result in reduced quality control, but of at least equal interest are the perspectives of the honors students who would be targeted by for-profit programs. Contemporary students are, I believe, more aware of the financial burdens and costs of an education than students of 20 years ago. Beginning in the 1990s, with the dramatic increase in

tutions and with the economy taking center stage in the news cycle, students have been constantly looking for ways to defray the costs of their education. Universities are ramping up programs and development activities to bolster scholarship funds to attract students. More and more students are being selective in getting some credits done at a regional college or community college before they have to invest larger amounts of money at a more expensive university to finish their degrees. Our students are savvy and work hard to make certain their costs are manageable. With student loan repayment often being the equivalent of a car payment, students have to worry about education costs. The for-profit approach threatens not only to increase the cost in an exploitive fashion but also to add a layer of complexity to an educational process that is already complicated enough. The three student responses below helped me to better understand how students respond to such issues.

DESTENIE NOCK

(SENIOR IN ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING AND APPLIED MATH)

While in college, I have benefited greatly from being part of the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (NCA&T) Honors Program. The smaller classes in my freshman and sophomore years gave me the great foundation I needed to be successful in my later years. Also, my honors advisors were able to introduce me to scholarships of which I had been unaware, including the Mitchell Scholarship. The honors program assisted me throughout the application process for the Mitchell Scholarship, and I am the first recipient from an historically black university.

However, if I had had to pay an extra fee to be a part of the honors college during my freshman year, then I would not have joined the program. My tuition and fees for college were not fully covered by scholarships, and I have two younger brothers who would also like to attend college. During my freshman year I could not have known all of the benefits that the honors program would bring me in my academic career. I would not have been able to justify to my father why he should pay more money for me to be in a program that is not necessary for graduation. When institutions move towards privatizing programs and start charging people to be in honors, fewer students are able to benefit. Once honors programs start charging fees, the focus moves away from benefiting as many students as possible to benefiting only the students who can afford the service, and honors programs should not be restricted to the wealthy. The quality of my education should not be jeopardized by how much profit the university can make. Students who study hard and make good grades should not be punished with higher fees, and excelling in college should not be made harder by making honors programs less accessible.

Furthermore, the proximate and personal nature of the honors program has been a key element of its success and also of mine. The honors office is a short walk from my dormitory, and passing by it as I walk to class reminds me to stop in and talk to my advisers. Even if I only stay for ten minutes, I continue to build a bond with my honors mentors and to feel comfortable talking to them about various matters. Having a community of people to talk to about classes, career options, funding options for graduate school, and life in general has greatly benefited my academic career. If I had this kind of access only online, I would not have the level of comfort, convenience, and personal attention that I have on campus.

JUSTICE PLUMMER
(JUNIOR IN AGRICULTURAL BUSINESS)

In the article “The Profit Motive in Honors Education,” Gary Bell identifies a current movement to profit from honor students at community colleges. A company known as American Honors promises to help enhance community college students’ learning experience so that they can be admitted to four-year institutions, but the students must pay a fee in addition to their regular tuition that can mean an additional \$1,650–\$2,565. In my opinion, students would be smarter to enroll in non-profit honors programs, almost all of which are free or low-cost, at their community college and their chosen four-year institution.

When considering the rising cost of attending four-year institutions, I think the money that students use for the American Honors fee would serve them better in a savings account. Even at a small rate of interest, saving that money for a four-year institution will help the student may offset the cost of one to twelve credit hours. Students also need to take into account that every honors credit from the community college may not transfer to their chosen college or university, and, if they have paid extra fees for such credits, then they have experienced a serious financial loss.

Although I am against the profit motive in honors education, I can see the rationale for American Honors. From a business standpoint, they are no different from companies such as Apple, Whole Foods, or Dyson. These three companies express a sense of social responsibility at the same time that they are businesses looking to make money from their target market. In the case of American Honors, however, there seems to be a disconnect between them and their customers. Their product, an honors program for community college students, is an admirable and ambitious endeavor, but, looking rationally at the logistics of the American Honors product, I cannot see that it makes sense.

ASHLEIGH WILSON

(SOPHOMORE IN MULTIMEDIA JOURNALISM)

Honors education, an outlet for high achievers that fosters leadership development, creative expression, and critical thinking, has been criticized for catering only to students who are the “cream of the crop.” Parents and students alike are lured into investing in the idea that, through enrollment in an honors program, a student will have access to the highest quality of instruction and will be almost guaranteed success in the corporate world. The problem with this expectation is that both parents and students fail to consider exactly where their money is going. The student organizations and honor societies that charge membership fees and dues are unlikely to be worthwhile investments if they merely serve as résumé buffers.

The average employer today spends only six seconds reviewing a résumé, according to a study released by the online job search site called TheLadders <<http://info.theladders.com/our-team/you-only-get-6-seconds-of-fame-make-it-count>>, so using one’s résumé as a marketing tool is no doubt important. Unfortunately, though, for many students the race towards building a résumé leads to joining organizations or attending colleges and universities that charge a high price for the promise of credibility, service, and scholarships, which all comes with a high price. For-profit institutions, such as DeVry University, Everest College, Kaplan University, and ITT Technical Institute, may carry through on their promises of employment, on-site training, flexibility, and online accommodations, the question is whether graduates have received a valuable education. An embellished piece of paper may validate that a student has met or exceeded the institution’s academic standards and may indicate readiness to enter into a professional business environment, but the question that students and parents need to ask about any educational institution is what value their money has purchased for them. It is not clear to me whether participation in American Honors is just another line on a résumé or is somehow more than that. Given that I have no real data on American Honors and do not know if such data exist yet, I would be skeptical about participating until I knew it would provide the skills and knowledge I will need to be successful after graduation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

(MICHAEL K. CUNDALL JR.)

The overarching theme in the above responses is the value, not cost, attached to honors education. Students value the education that honors can bring them because they believe that value can bring palpable benefits later. Universities understand the value of an honors program as a recruiting tool and

as a way to bring prestige to the university through its high-quality students. Parents, who often want their children to become part of a program that will provide them future benefit, are also interested in honors. However, honors programs come at a cost. As many honors administrators note, departments often have difficulty justifying the loss of credit hours for smaller classes, and administrators often have to make tough decisions. It is the relation between value and cost that makes this for-profit angle so fraught with the potential for abuse. As the students make clear, they have to balance the short-term costs with a long-term bet on a promised benefit. For Justice Plummer, it is clear that the pennies of interest earned from the money not spent on honors, money that might be important given the emergencies that occur in our lives, might be better than having a dubious line on a transcript or résumé. Students, as many educators know, often pack their résumés with activities and memberships, but the actual work or experience committed to extracurricular activities can be questionable. The race is on to get that last little item on a résumé that might get a student kicked up into the next smaller pool of applicants by the screening software. The focus on joining clubs and activities to buffer the résumé can overshadow the skills and abilities developed. A program like American Honors, which sits far away from both the educators that provide the coursework and the students taking it, cannot easily ascertain the value added.

If we value our students, honors and otherwise, then as educators we must make certain that whatever experiences and programs our students take from our universities or colleges is evaluated for merit. When we outsource an important facet of our educational responsibility such as honors education, and when we remove local resources that ensure a meaningful honors experience, then students and the marketplace will eventually see that the promised benefits are not worth the cost, and the lack of value will cost the university or college in the future.

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