

An Honors Koan: Selling Water by the River

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“Bring out number weight & measure in a year of dearth.”

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Since Jerry Herron begins his forum essay, “Notes toward an Excellent Marxist-Elitist Honors Admissions Policy,” with his anecdotal True Genealogical Confessions, I feel obligated to begin in a similar mode. One side of my family was in the real estate business in St. Louis, and the other operated on the production side of industry—garment manufacturing, in the *schmatta* business so to speak. Like Herron, I have benefitted from a familial confluence of disparate skill sets in my position as Director of the Georgia Perimeter College Honors Program, which during the recruiting and registration season I would liken to that of the Buddhist monk selling water from a haphazardly constructed lemonadesque stand situated on the bank of a river. Of course, what unwary wayfaring students to GPC’s educational waters do not know is that my suitemate, who has for too many years endured overhearing my recruiting spiels, calls me a silver-tongued devil. No comment.

The recruiting business in honors at GPC is dramatically different from that at Wayne State University, and these differences are compelling me to contribute to this forum precisely because they underscore the oft-repeated honors truism that Herron fervently intones and greatly respects: honors programs are part and parcel of their home institution’s landscape. Indeed, while honors programs and colleges obviously share many features, the differences can be profound; moreover, the differences between institutions matter as well, and the significance of those institutional differences should not be dismissed in the face of what Stanley Fish labels “the culture of measurement [that] is in the ascendancy” and the fervent zealots of cookie-cutter measurements and certifications.

Herron is not one of those “proposing to apply one formula across the board.” Unlike Wayne State, which Herron describes as a “Carnegie research university,” GPC is a multi-campus, two-year, liberal arts transfer college and one of the largest institutions in the University System of Georgia. It is the largest feeder school for the University of Georgia, Georgia State University,

Georgia Southern University, and Georgia Tech as well as an important source of sophomore and junior transfers to Emory University, Agnes Scott College, and Oglethorpe University. As an access school that does not require SAT or ACT scores, GPC, like Atlanta itself, provides a stable location for many people but for others a transitory layover on a journey elsewhere. Like Atlanta residents, many students come and go inexplicably, staying for a course or a semester and then vanishing like Keyser Soze in *The Usual Suspects*.

The GPC Honors Program reflects its urban and institutional environment. The admissions criteria are well-published: high school GPA, college transfer GPA, GPA at GPC, SAT or ACT score, and faculty recommendations. The five campus honors coordinators and I recognize that we are often in the reclamation business for students who have had way too much fun during their first attempt at college in Athens or Boston or have suffered family travails that returned them to Atlanta or have experienced a midlife career crisis that propelled them slightly scathed to the academy. On the other hand, almost every semester, a student with perfect SAT scores will somehow end up in my office just before the new term begins. I invariably thank these students for brightening my door and ask why they are at GPC. About six years ago, I asked that question of a young woman who immediately burst into tears; the thank you remains, but I have removed the question from my repertoire.

Discerning the students obviously qualified for honors at GPC is easy, but the moral is clear: honors education in practice and in theory should be flexible, and, as deciders about who will enter the program, the campus honors coordinators and I must be as well. Beyond providing opportunities for those needing to rehabilitate their academic résumés, we should provide opportunities for the film major who is not quite eligible but will benefit from an honors film course or the talented psych major who wants to take an upper-level honors psychology course to enhance her portfolio for graduate school. Some students exhibit a spark that needs some honors kindling, and honors recruitment at GPC is an art, not science. Consequently, a faculty member might praise her honors class one semester as the best ever and two years later lament the anemic performance of her honors students.

My job is unlike Herron's at Wayne State, where he has to compete on the recruiting trail with fearsome academic rivals just down the road. Decades ago, when I first ventured into the honors business at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, the honors director, Len Zane, and I would drive hundreds of miles into the desert to recruit students from a remote Nevada high school. In Atlanta, I have rarely made presentations at local high schools in Atlanta, a task left to GPC's recruiters armed with honors brochures. The GPC Honors Program cannot compete for high school seniors with the University of Georgia Honors

Program or the new Georgia State Honors College, but I do have a network of articulation agreements that give our graduates access to honors programs at four-year institutions like Georgia Southern with guaranteed scholarships. Although some students matriculate at GPC because of its honors program, our struggle is typically not to convince students to come to GPC but to convince GPC students to risk joining honors when, given their class schedules, work, and family obligations, they are apprehensive about increasing their workload and possibly lowering their GPA.

The benefits of small classes and personal attention are not self-evident at GPC. Every semester, we must re-create a significant percentage of the honors student population. The first third of reaching our registration goals is easy, the second third is hard, and scouring the landscape to attract the final third is really hard. We do not have the circumstances, time, or resources to conduct data analysis of students in our program, especially against a cohort group. GPC's data people have done yeoman service in gathering data to show that students in the program graduate at a much higher rate than the rest of the student body and that the GPA for students in their honors courses is slightly higher than in their non-honors courses. I cannot offer, however, a corollary to Wayne State's magical number of 105, the predictor of success derived from multiplying high school GPA times ACT score. Even if I could, such a number would be irrelevant here. Our task is encouraging students to accept the challenge of honors education and to do the best work they can. Instead of a litmus test for calibrating potential students, we focus on incentives for students to enroll, such as local and national scholarships and access to excellent four-year schools where our students will be able to go after GPC—and they do go, and they do well.

While I meticulously track enrollment and recruiting figures for all of the campus honors programs, the survival and importance of the GPC Honors Program have never been driven or threatened by data during the more than two decades that I have been involved with honors education at the college, even when two years ago a 25-million-dollar deficit led to major institutional house cleaning. All the budgets were slashed; travel funds for faculty development disappeared; and almost three hundred hardworking employees were fired, or what they call “riffed.”

The honors program, like every other area at the college, took a budget hit, but the funding remained sufficient to maintain the essential features and programs within honors. The cap for honors sections was raised from fifteen to nineteen—not ideal, but manageable. While other units suffered devastation, the honors program stayed in operation with minor adjustments at all of GPC's six campuses.

Data did not seem to be the driving force behind the decision to continue supporting the honors program at roughly its former status, and, after reading Herron's essay, I grew curious about the role of data in judgments about honors at GPC, so I scheduled a meeting with Interim President Rob Watts. Watts is quite familiar with honors, and I asked him about the administration's perspective on the honors program and why support for it did not appear to be data-driven.

Watts's first observation was that the honors program had the support of the faculty. I was not the only honors advocate: the wide network of faculty members who teach in the program and serve on the Honors Council strongly support the enterprise of honors. He also stated that the honors program and I have earned credibility at the college and in the larger honors community. That credibility mattered even in a hard-nosed business environment where higher administrators were facing a potential financial meltdown. Credibility, while earned through labor, deed, language, and integrity, transcends—like education itself—the quantifiable. Credibility is a judgment call.

Watts also noted that the GPC Honors Program exists at the core of the institution's mission: education. A kind of corollary to what the college provides through learning support for underprepared students, the honors program offers an opportunity for students who are well prepared for advanced work and the challenges to be found there. Last year, when the budget crisis was most acute, the only small classes offered at the college, Watts observed, were the honors sections because small classes are intrinsic to the nature of honors. That is a given. Data not required.

Given the proliferation of sessions about assessment, measurements, numbers, and rubrics in the conference program for New Orleans 2013, my situation may represent a receding minority, but, if that is the case, I find comfort in another proverb of honors lore: honors education should maintain its integrity and be inventive rather than simply succumbing to the educational fashion of the day. Herron, channeling Tom Wolfe, calls it “this hog-stomping, assessment-obsessed political culture of ours,” an apt image that is complemented by Obama's insight: “Just weighing a pig doesn't fatten it.”

In his analysis of Derek Bok's *Higher Education in America*, Fish notes that Bok, despite being “a member of the data . . . culture,” is “acutely aware of the limits of what can be tested, measured and assessed.” Bok writes:

Some of the essential aspects of academic institutions—in particular the quality of the education they provide—are largely intangible and their results are difficult to measure. . . . [The] result is that much of what is important to the work of colleges and universities may be neglected, undervalued, or laid aside in the pursuit of more visible goals. (qtd. in Fish)

Fish adds, “in other words, we’re probably measuring the wrong things and the right things are not amenable to measurement.” Fish deplores the disparity that exists between “counting things” and “knowing anything deeply about them,” and I share his fear of the rising menace of hollow assessment and certification rubrics.

The waters of River Honors flow onward, but I find no lure in creating data upon data to justify the vainglory of so-called honors professionals or the institutional prominence of the honors edifice to the detriment of educating its residents. I do not want to dam the river with measurements so that my honors program can justify having more and more, including palatial real estate on a newly created lake or fancy new academic trappings. I stand with my prospective honors students and point with a wave of my hand toward the river and what it offers. I will not be handing them a measuring cup: whether they drink and how much and how deeply will be their decision.

REFERENCE

Fish, Stanley. “The Two Cultures of Educational Reform.” *New York Times*. New York Times, 26 Aug. 2013. Web. 29 Aug. 2013. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/26/the-two-cultures-of-educational-reform/?_r=0>.

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