

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Raising the Bar Revisited," by Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, 9/1/99

Mary Jean's argument in the *Faculty Forum* is based on the assertion that honors students are not "integrated into the mainstream" and are the cause of a "brain drain" from other classes. Honors students take honors courses (almost all of these general education) within the first two years; there are no 300 or 400-level honors courses. Usually, less than half of the general education courses that these students take are honors. The rest of the course work they do in honors is through "Honors Contracts" in regular classes. The typical honors student will do no more than about 15% of his or her course work toward a degree in honors courses. In 1996, there were just over 100 students in the old honors program (they took honors courses then, too). Today, there are 500 students in the Honors College and most of them are in non-honors courses and the majority of them (in the majors) are not taking any honors courses. There are more honors students taking non-honors courses on this campus than ever before.

Brian Railsback, Acting Dean, Honors College

Oh, I get it. This is reverse psychology. Excellent, Mary Jean! You are so sly as you draw our attention to the often-missed highlights of the Honors College (e.g., the statistical success in recruiting and retaining students, the attractive webpages, the appreciated sense of belonging, smaller student-faculty ratios, students' pride and satisfaction, the appropriate environmental resources) to get us to realize that *WCU could be doing this for all students!* Very good point, MJ. In fact, in your next piece, please raise similar "inconvenient questions" about Project Care, for we need to pay attention to successes of both these "special interest" programs so we might do what Corporate America does better than us in Higher Ed—praise, study, copy and reward successful products and programs.

Chris Gunn, Counseling & Psychological Services

I appreciated your article in the *Faculty Forum*. I imagine that Jeannie Oakes, a leader in the de-tracking of students movement, would applaud. Your attention to the dilemma of modeling a tracking system within our university caused me to reflect on our reasons for doing so. I understand the decisions in light of retention of outstanding students, but I wonder if those very students are at a disadvantage. Other students have much to teach these "honors" students.

Gayle Moller, Educational Leadership and Foundations

The text for USI 130, the class required for all freshman, provides some interesting guidelines regarding ethical decision making. Perhaps we should practice what we preach and use these same guidelines to evaluate the merits of the Honors College as it currently exists. Several students, both freshmen and upperclassmen, have made comments to me recently about the Honor's College that would lead one to consider its existence from an ethical standpoint. One junior said, "If you get the message enough times that you are not good enough, you begin to believe it. I used to think I could be a part of the Honors College, and now I realize I will never be." The guidelines in the USI text, among other applicable points, suggests that equity and benefit maximization should be considered in making ethical decisions. While I am not opposed to the existence of an honor's college, is there a way it could be structured so that it were equitable and of benefit to more than just an elite group of students?

Lisa Bloom, Human Services

Responses to "Raising the Bar Revisited," by Mary Jean Herzog, 9/1/99, continued

Mary Jean admits that her assumptions about what goes on in general education sections are based on anecdotal evidence so I wish to add mine. I came to Western ten years ago after teaching four years at three institutions, two private colleges and one community college. I was in shock for the first several weeks I was here. Nothing I had experienced in the classroom prepared me for my general education classes. My students were nice kids but they were very poorly prepared and weren't terribly interested in learning. Many started to party on Wednesday night, most thought an adequate response to an essay question was three sentences long. In world religion courses some students bore witness on final exams but weren't sure who Moses and David were. On the whole they were not as strong as my community college students.

New people I met in Asheville or Hendersonville would say "Oh yes, Western; that's the place where anyone can get in." I had students from my church tell me they decided to come to Western because they could not get in the school they wanted and as soon as their grades were good enough they would leave. This is not to say I didn't get some very good students in general education classes but I generally could not identify them until after the first exam and often when I spoke to them they told me they also planned to leave at the first opportunity. I didn't blame them; I too wanted to leave. They didn't really speak out much in class because the world of ideas was not valued. I had never encountered a campus culture so void of intellectual life.

Somehow, I became part of the "Honors Faculty" and several years ago I attended an honor's faculty breakfast at which one administrator said we were giving honors students the same education they would get at Davidson. This was a lie of such proportions that it boggled the mind. At that time there was not much of a curriculum. My experience with honors students was through honors contracts: honors students in my courses would request something extra to do to make it an "honors" class. So we would read an extra book and meet once a week outside of class to discuss it. These students were not all that vocal in class. There were so few of them I believe the negative momentum of campus culture just crushed them.

It is my experience that over the last several years all my general education classes have steadily improved. This is due in part to my having learned to teach Western students more effectively than when I was first here, but I also think our students are better. Not just that they are coming better prepared, but that we are, excruciatingly slowly, moving toward an institution where intellectual pursuits are really valued, not buried under "feel good" rhetoric. I think the Honors College has been a major part of this movement.

The only disappointment I have with the new honors sections of general education, and here I agree with Mary Jean, is that we have been unable to reserve places in them for non-honors students. This is not what the honors college committee had envisaged. Part of the problem has been that the Honors College has grown much faster than we expected and all the sections are filled with honors students. To remedy the problem we should reserve a few seats in each section for non-honors students who want the challenge of an honors class. Of course this means we will have to open even more sections. This possibility does not bother me at all. But if Mary Jean is right; it could take even more of the most motivated students out of the regular sections.

Finally, honors students still take most of their courses with non-honors students. Students feed off each other's energy and excitement. Hopefully honors students leave their honors college residence has created another haven on campus for intellectual discussion that is open to whoever wants to seek it out. The college itself is open to anyone with the interest, ability, and commitment to join it. I don't find this type of elitism disturbing.

James McLachlan, Philosophy and Religion

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A diverse array of students certainly makes a positive difference in classroom atmosphere, as evidenced in my evening Music Appreciation class this semester, where among the 65 students there are several adults and honors college students. What is needed is fewer honors college courses and greater encouragement of those students to take regular courses with honors contracts.

James Maroney, Music

On many of the points she raises, I agree with Mary Jean. That we might create intellectual and social elites by placing students (whether in high school or in college) in honors and non-honors tracks is certainly a possibility of which we should be aware and against which we should guard. However, the "honor course issue" Mary Jean raised is multifaceted and can, I think, be broken down into four, somewhat independent, issues. The first three of these are relevant to what we see and do in our classrooms. The fourth issue concerns the potential effects of ability-based segregation on social interactions outside of the classroom.

A first issue involves the relationships among "raising the bar" via higher SAT scores, classroom discourse, and critical thinking. As Mary Jean pointed out, we strive in our courses to engage students intellectually in the task of sharing and creating knowledge. Mary Jean's concern is that, by separating honor students from the general student population, we will inadvertently decrease classroom diversity, level of discussion, and vitality and that, because the Honor's College is siphoning away the better students, instructors are left with depleted "raw materials" with whom they work and interact. Thus, our general ed courses are populated by fewer students who enjoy knowledge acquisition, intellectual challenge, and involvement in engaging, well thought-out student-student and teacher-student argumentation. This conclusion, which is apparently shared with a number of Mary Jean's colleagues, may well be correct, but I would caution against its hasty acceptance.

My primary concern is that we too readily interpret SAT scores (and, more generally, scores from standardized "ability" tests) as indices of aspects of intellectual dispositions and motivations that they are not intended to measure directly. In brief, considerable empirical evidence contravenes the assumption that aspects of critical thinking and intellectual engagement are related to SAT and intelligence test scores. In the face of this evidence, Mary Jean's concerns may be premature: we do not know how SAT-based segregation has affected the distribution of intellectual dispositions or motivations. In addition, as Mary Jean undoubtedly knows, her "sample" of instructors is biased in a number of ways. For example, even if their observations were valid, instructors who teach only the general student population, but not honors students, cannot know whether or not the same diminished intellectual engagement (relative to previous years) that they see in their classes would also be evident if they taught honor's classes. Similarly, if the observations Mary Jean reported are accurate, we do not know that they arose because of "tracking" into general and elite populations--self-fulfilling prophecies on the part of teachers could well account for the observed differences. The point of these observations is simply that we should be wary of making quick and easy generalizations based on little evidence. If we are really concerned over this issue (and we should be), we need to examine the classroom atmospheres created by our students and instructors in a series of well-designed research projects.

The second issue concerns the possible "brain drain" in the general student population. Certainly, our higher admission standards now suggest that we're not dealing with "dumber" students in the general population. What has happened is that the range of intellectual ability in that population has decreased (because, first, higher ability students have been removed in the sense that they take some, but not all, of their courses separately from other students and, second, more lower ability students

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have been kept out the population because of higher admission standards). Again, although we don't know whether or not the distribution of various critical thinking dispositions and motivations have been affected by the honor's program, the general population of students is more intellectually homogenous than in the past.

Third, how would honor's courses change if they were open to all students? Obviously, diversification--at least in terms of intellectual ability, would increase. I would argue that this diversification is not likely to change the level, type, or intensity of in-class discussions. As noted previously, personal dispositions to look forward to, accept, and pursue challenging intellectual tasks (called, in the social psychology literature, the "Need for Cognition"), is poorly correlated with raw "ability." In the general student population (the intellectual underclass), a significant percentage (again, we need research to determine this percentage) will be motivationally-driven by this "need." These are precisely those students who would most likely enroll in honor's courses if they had the opportunity. Relative to more "intelligent" students (as measured by intelligence test proxies, like the SAT), less intelligent students with greater "needs for cognition" are better critical thinkers on numerous dimensions (e.g., open-mindedness, willingness to evaluate and ponder evidence contrary to personal beliefs). This statement is not merely my opinion; it is a well-established empirical finding. It's a shame that this group of thoughtful, highly-motivated students doesn't have the same opportunities as students with high SAT scores (the validity of this points hinges on making a leap of faith--that honor's courses are more engaging, challenging, and discussion-oriented than non-honor's courses).

Finally, we now segregate students into two tiers, an underclass and an elite. Sociological and psychological research over the past century has established that, whether it takes place in educational contexts or more general societal contexts, this results in distinctively class-related attitudes. Look at us: isn't intellectual snobbery evident when faculty from some department/colleges compare themselves with faculty from other departments/colleges? My concern, however, is this: have elitist attitudes formed in our honor's students? Do honor's students see themselves as "better" than students who live in small rooms without air-conditioning in dorms that look nothing like hotels and have palm-sized TVs or sinks hidden away in bathrooms and who simply bob their heads up and down in class and learn slowly, very slowly? The honor's students themselves answer this question: see their web page.

Paul Klaczynski, Psychology

Is Mary Jean Ronan Herzog attacking the Honor's College website for being so clever and visually pleasing? Maybe some of the Honors College satisfaction rates and popularity is due to this website? Maybe it appeals to students because it was written and designed by honors college students? Maybe if the Chancellor finds out which students created those web pages, he'll hire them to do the same for other colleges and departments? (They might be cheaper than outside consultants). Maybe?

Anonymous