



Faculty Forum

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Raising the Bar Revisited: Some Inconvenient Questions* about Unintended Consequences

*At the general faculty meeting, Terry Kinnear, Chair of the Faculty, challenged us to ask "inconvenient" questions. This article raises such questions about the effect of exclusive honors courses.

Chancellor Bardo reported at the general faculty meeting on August 12 that the quality of our students is the best ever, pronouncing our attempts to increase standards a success. We are attracting National Merit Scholars and average SAT scores are up. These are indeed promising trends.

Recently, however, I have heard more than a few faculty murmuring about a decline in the quality of classroom dynamics. For example, one who regularly teaches general education classes complained that her students seem to have gone downhill in the last couple of years. Where they once had a certain vitality stemming from diverse student abilities and interests, she said, they now seem duller. Another was perplexed by his "sweet but disabled" sophomore class, and he wondered where the better students had gone. This seems ironic given the well-publicized increase in WCU student quality.

Something seems awry here. How can it be that we bring in better students and raise the bar but still complain about listless classes? Could it be the result of a siphoning off of the better students through the "Honors Program Students Only" designation, leaving some classes depleted of high achieving and highly motivated students? The Honors College website lists 35 honors courses for the spring 1998 semester. The schedule of courses for this fall indicates that 33 courses are reserved for honors program students only. These include:

- 26 general education courses
- 2 lab courses
- 5 USI (Honors Forum) courses

Additionally, the Honors College offers a Millennium Seminar, a learning community for 20 honors students in which they will take eight interrelated courses together for their entire freshman year. For all the good it's doing the honors students, I'm afraid the Honors College may be creating a brain-drain in non-honors classes, thereby contributing to the emergence of a two-tiered system at WCU.

Dr. Bardo said the higher quality of our 400 honors students causes the other students to stretch. That's a good theory if the honors students are integrated into the mainstream, particularly in general education, where the non-honors students can benefit from their vigorous class contributions. When the Honors College was planned, the classes were not intended to be exclusive. Honors courses were supposed to be open to any motivated student who was willing to

work hard. Honors students would be mixed in with others, resulting in high bar classes causing all participants to stretch.

We have reason to be proud of our attempts to raise the bar. Attracting better students to WCU is a major part of the initiative. The Honors College is a creative and positive strategy. But our attempts to raise the bar will backfire if honors students are secluded from non-honors students and if the perks they receive are excessive in comparison to non-honors students. The Honors College website appeals to students with the following questions:

*Have you ever been in a class that was so unchallenging you could hardly stay awake?
Have you ever wanted to learn more and faster than the class would allow? Or wish
you could have a discussion with a professor in class rather than simply listen?*

Advantages to honors students, according to the website, are exciting classes, smaller classes, priority registration, and an honors common room in G-55 Stillwell where honors students have access to a free copier, computers, social area, TV/VCR, and phones. The invitation to live in the honors dorm in Reynolds is advertised in a David Letterman format:

Top 10 Reasons to Live in Reynolds, The Honors Residence:

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| 10. Big screen TV | 5. Four people per bathroom |
| 9. Balconies on second and third floors | 4. Sink in every room |
| 8. Larger rooms | 3. Lobby resembles that of a hotel |
| 7. Only air-conditioned residence | 2. Personal beach volleyball court |
| 6. Only residence with a computer lab | 1. Friendly atmosphere |

In view of the perks offered for the Honors students, it's not surprising that the freshman survey reports honors students had much higher satisfaction with campus life (96%) in comparison to 48% for other students.

Our mission encourages us to expect all students to make valuable contributions to the WCU community. The catalog states:

To encourage and protect the free and open interchange of ideas, the University strives to provide experiences that foster the development of respect among all its members toward the larger communities of which it is a part....

Rather than "raising the bar" for all students, we may have created a two-tiered system, separating the elite from the ordinary. Elitism and privilege do not really seem to mesh with our stated ideals or our historical mission. If we want to truly raise the bar, we must have high expectations for all students, not only the ones designated as the "best." More classes should be honors classes, but they should be open to every student who wishes to make the effort. Such classes should contain a healthy mix of all types of students at WCU. The unintended consequences of exclusive honors courses may be undermining our attempts to raise the bar for the University as a whole.

Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, Educational Leadership & Foundations

The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.