

What's the Point of an Honors College, Anyway?

Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle of Higher Education

By Nancy M. West

At a baseball game two summers ago, as other parents cheered on their kids, I argued about the value of an honors college with the father of my son's teammate, whom I'll call Tyler.

Tyler's dad is the kind of parent who bales constant "advice" to the coach and points out the mistakes of every child on the team but his own. Between innings, he asked what I did for a living. When I told him I had just been appointed to direct the Honors College at the University of Missouri, he sneered. "My ex-wife wants our oldest son to enroll in that, but I'm opposed. He plans to be a doctor. He needs good grades. He shouldn't be taking harder classes."

Then he looked me straight in the eye and asked, "What's the point of an honors college, anyway?" It was hot, and I wanted to smack him. So I gave him a snooty answer about how I thought "any parent would want his child to challenge himself." Needless to say, he didn't respond well.

That exchange turned out to be the first of many conversations I've had about the value of an honors college. Like Tyler's dad, though more politely, prospective students express concern that the challenge of an honors curriculum will jeopardize their GPAs, and therefore their chances of finding a job or getting into graduate school. So do their parents. Some people on campus bristle at the "elitism" of honors colleges, uncomfortable with the notion of singling out students for special attention and benefits.

Both of these viewpoints are understandable. More distressing has been my realization that the honors college often needs to be defended to administrators, from department chairs upward. Honors education has never been a cost-effective enterprise, given its

demands for quality instruction, small classes, enhanced opportunities, and personalized service to students. As more and more colleges gravitate toward larger classes and online delivery, honors now seems like a luxury they can no longer afford.

We need then to think about honors colleges in a way that deals with current anxieties and economic pressures. And we need to state their value so that it can resonate with many people, even Tyler's dad.

So what is the point of an honors college? There are two ways to answer that question. The first is in terms of students. Most high-ability students need individual attention. Honors colleges provide that. More important, they promote the value of striving for the best one can do. In an academic culture tainted by grade inflation, honors colleges celebrate true accomplishment, instilling in students the pride that comes with being thoroughly in earnest about their education.

As to GPA concerns: My experience has been that honors students often do better in their honors courses than in their non-honors courses. The reasons for this success are partly the quality of the instruction, partly the mentoring students receive from professors, but mainly the firepower that comes from putting smart, motivated students together. In the words of Rachel Harper, who coordinates our honors humanities series, "Surrounded by other high-achieving and curious students—both in their classes and in their living arrangements—honors students feel pressure in the best of ways to do well."

Honors is thus the "natural home of pure meritocracy," as my colleague David Setzer argues. Universities need such a home more than ever. While colleges become more like companies, and "excellence" increasingly refers to financial success, surely we can justify the value of an honors college by guaranteeing that it remains one space on the campus where deep thought flourishes, and where "excellence" still possesses meaning.

The other way to answer the question of an honors college's value is in terms of its benefit to a university. For one, honors colleges enhance the prestige of their universities by enrolling high-achieving students who provide a leavening influence on the campus and then go on to achieve great things.

They also have the potential to serve as a "third place" for their universities. In 1989, the sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the term "third place" to refer to environments, separate from work and home, which people visit frequently and voluntarily. Examples include coffeehouses, cafes, salons, and the Internet.

Although they vary wildly in look and feel, third places share certain fundamental traits. They act as social levelers, discounting class status as a marker of social significance. Their mood is playful; their atmosphere is warm and friendly. They promote group creativity and lively conversation. Most important, they serve as anchors of a community, fostering broad and less scripted interactions than those we have at home or our regular workplaces.

"These shared areas have played an outsized role in the history of new ideas," observes Oldenburg. And yet compared with other countries, America does not place much importance on third places. And what's true of our country is also true of our universities. Faculty and staff rarely venture beyond the buildings that house their departments. University officials sequester themselves in spacious offices located within buildings populated exclusively by administrative offices. And students—too many of them these days—go from their classrooms to their part-time jobs to their apartments.

Universities need third places in order for new kinds of research and thinking to propagate. Honors colleges, meanwhile, need a new identity in order to successfully assert their value in the future.

Thinking about honors colleges as third places gives us a new and nonelitist way of asserting their value to a university. It reinforces how they can serve as spaces of creativity; conversation; intellectualism; collegiality. It also reinforces their potential

as homes of interdisciplinarity. Like all third places, honors colleges are neutral ground, separate from departments and yet in the business of serving them all; as such, they provide an ideal space for the kind of “in between” collaboration required by interdisciplinary work. Honors colleges are where team-teaching—that activity we all say we should do more of but can’t because of departmental restrictions—really can happen.

This spring, thanks to the cooperation of the art history and English departments, I’m team-teaching an honors course called “Thinking About Color” with two other professors. The course is wildly interdisciplinary, focusing on subjects like Technicolor and the history of mauve. Our planning meetings for the course have been electrifying, intellectually and pedagogically. And in each meeting, ideas for collaborative research bubble up. I can’t remember ever feeling this creative, or collegial, about my teaching.

The answers I’ve articulated here all arrive at the same conclusion, which is that the “point of an honors college” is its idealism. Honors represents higher education at its best and most aspirational. If I could replay that dreadful conversation with Tyler’s dad from two years ago, that is what I’d tell him.

I’d also point out that my son, Silas, hit a double that day.