

August 26, 2008

Dear Colleagues,

My intention in these few pages is to respond to the invitation given out by the UCA Faculty Senate President, Dr. Kurt Boneicki regarding the proposal by the Honors College regarding tenure. The commission is indicated as follows:

“Faculty members at UCA are invited to submit formal written responses to the Honors position paper. Responses should include pragmatic suggestions for revising the Honors director’s proposal or should present alternative models for Honors program staffing.”

My detailed comments follow in the next few pages but I can offer a simple summary of my thoughts here. The proposal as it is written is largely ineffective. The actual intention of the Honors College may be a good one, but I found myself unable to glean the primary argument out of these documents.

Simply put –the text does not clearly explain the issue. I am not the most intelligent academic at the University of Central Arkansas by a long shot, but I do have a few degrees and publications under my (considerably long) belt. Nevertheless, I was left largely bewildered by this document. Maybe this is a brilliant proposal that is just way over my head.

In any event, communication is a two-way street requiring the message to be both broadcast *and* received. This proposal uses a vocabulary that I am unfamiliar with. I hope that obfuscation was not part of the intention. The instructions indicate that I have to make a “pragmatic suggestion.” My recommendation in this regard is to have the Honors College re-write the proposal.

I understand however that they would like to see some movement on this issue, and that time is of consideration. If a representative of the Honors College can clearly and cogently explain this proposal in person to the Faculty Senate or the appropriate sub-committee/panel, then I would trust the Senate’s actions one way or another. I just do not believe this particular document is of much use for initiating a campus-wide discussion. A number of my colleagues started to read it, but few finished. I am sure the proposal makes more sense to those familiar with the underlying issue, but as a stand-alone document it is bewildering.

To further illustrate my general impressions, more specific observations and criticism appear on the following pages. I have broken the document into its three main sections and made commentary on material from each one in the order in which it appears.

Thank You,

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Executive Summary

“The Honors College seeks to remove the restriction currently placed on its tenure and promotion guidelines that limits applicability of the guidelines to those hired before September 1, 2005...” -This strikes me a pretty opaque statement. Could it not be put in simpler terms? The phrase “applicability of the guidelines” is both passive and unclear.

“...the inauguration of more structured arrangements by which senior tenured faculty from other departments can teach Honors courses;” -This likewise seems to be a befuddled way of saying something which is probably fairly simple. Are we being told that the Honors College will make it easier for outside faculty to teach their courses? I am not particularly sure what this means.

“2. Mission. As it has evolved over the history of the honors movement nationwide, including for the last twenty-five years on this campus, the mission of the Honors College requires a group of dedicated scholars involved in teaching, mentoring, and research in an interdisciplinary community.” -I am pretty certain I follow this, but it too could be made clearer.

On the other hand the following makes absolutely no sense to me: “Each of these considerations collects a number of specific issues that the Honors College wishes to be widely understood by UCA faculty involved in conversation about its faculty status.” -I am skeptical about how “widely understood” the Honors College wants this to be when language like this is employed.

I am not sure I know what the phrase “Considerations of Autonomy” is supposed to mean.

“The Honors College is the only academic unit on campus to have the number of its tenure-line faculty restricted.” Later this is ‘explained’ in an appendix discussion of the sunset clause: which states: “The guidelines² contain a “sunset clause,” limiting applicability to faculty hired prior to September, 2005.” -None of this is particularly clear to me nor, I suspect to anyone not intimately familiar with the details of the Honors College tenure-issue. This should really be explained in terms more appropriate to a wider audience.

The statement “The mission of the UCA Honors College is to serve the university at large...” follows immediately after six extensive bullet points about Honors College autonomy. This strikes me as something of a non sequitur.

I have no idea what “training in disintermediation” means.

Bullets 1 and 3 of “Considerations of the Mission” are redundant. Later on, attachment 1 repeats the commission to attract the best and brightest students two more times, and attachment 2 mentions it at least once. This point does not need to be made so many times. On that note, much of this document seems redundant.

“To enhance students' opportunities for intensive contact with accomplished scholars and to forge closer ties with other academic departments, we will offer arrangements to senior, tenured faculty to teach regularly in the Honors College as a late-career option or as part of their phased

retirement plans.” -The wording of this passage is supercilious and implies that the Honors College is doing external faculty a favor by allowing them to teach in their college and likewise assuming there is a demand to do so. It suggests a hierarchical relationship rather than one of equality. Eg. ‘We will allow some of them to teach for us,’ rather than ‘we actively recruit and partnership with other faculty.’

“The Honors College Director will convene a Faculty Advisory Committee to facilitate communication with the UCA faculty community.” -This is an excellent idea.

“As it has from its inception, the Honors College will continue to seek partnerships with other academic departments...” Speaking from my own experience and that of my immediate peers, “partnerships” is not the word I would use to characterize the Honors College’s relations with other departments. See my point two paragraphs above. In fact several years ago the Honors College asked our department to schedule two separate meetings with two of their representatives, and later cancelled both appointments. One of the cancellations was the day of the meeting after a number of faculty members who were not scheduled to teach that particular day had already driven in. To my knowledge we never received an explanation or an apology.

Attachment I

“For us the issue is simple.” –That is most fortunate, but this document does not do a particularly good job of making it simple to me.

“No other academic unit at UCA is burdened by a limit placed on the number or composition of its faculty.” –Unclear. Composition in terms of what? Political beliefs? Gender? Religion? Ethnicity? Hair-style?

“the main longterm consequence will be the inadvertent development of a two-track faculty in the Honors College – an untenable arrangement.” –Why is this “untenable?” A number of departments and colleges have two-track faculty.

“The principal concern voiced against tenuring and promoting faculty members in the Honors College is whether adequate assessment by peers would be possible of one’s scholarly contributions and professional development.” I do not follow this. What does “...of one’s scholarly contributions” actually mean? It is not clear. It appears to have a switch in tense from the general to the singular.

I wonder about the mechanics of having non-Honors College faculty serve on Honors College tenure and search committees. How large are these committees? Can one faculty member be easily out-voted or do they have veto powers? What about grade standards? Will the external member evaluate the student based on his/her own department’s grading standards or the more-inflated grading standards of the Honors College?

“Second, hiring, tenuring, and promoting Honors College faculty members in existing academic departments but appointing them (part-time or full-time) to the Honors College

does not take into account the day-to-day, lived experience of working in one academic unit while being evaluated by another. It sets up a bifurcated professional identity -- split loyalties.” -I actually understand this particular point and completely agree with it. It makes me suspect that I would be more supportive of the entire proposal if I could actually make better sense of it.

“We have taken special care at UCA with guidelines for the tenure and promotion of Honors College faculty members and with the procedures that form the committees. The process is working well (having been carried out twice so far with tenure and with promotion).” -I’m not sure the result mentioned really proves that effectiveness of the action. The advent of two grants of tenure or two promotions does not necessarily mean that appropriate checks and balances were utilized. This would be like General Motors claiming they have an environmentally-friendly car plant and then pointing out all the new cars that were produced by this plant as evidence of its environmental friendliness. I’m not saying these were *not* appropriate promotions or grants of tenure, but this particular statement seems to confuse outcomes and process.

“This calls for Honors College faculty to stand outside a day-to-day agenda and think in terms of university citizenship...” I would say that the popular impression in my college is that this is precisely what the Honors College has *failed* at and why there is concern over their tenure process in the first place. Unfair as it probably is, many other faculty feel the Honors College is an island unto itself; with little interaction amongst those outside its domain. This could probably be said about any UCA college, but if we are going to have a discussion about the Honors College specifically, then we need to take this into consideration.

“With this mission, “honors” becomes understood as a constellation of elements rather than just a certain kind of student or class or faculty member. It is a place where selected students and faculty members practice scholarship and citizenship together. We study great books not simply because the canon is what one studies, but because its answers have stood the test of time in coping with recurring human problems. We study other sources of answers, too – sources other than those of antiquity, from places other than the west, from women, from science, and from contemporary scholarship in a variety of fields.” -Wow. This is the kind of statement that shows the lack of diplomacy the Honors College has with regard to other faculty. There is an inherent implication in this statement that other colleges *do not* concern themselves with the non-western world, or women, or contemporary scholarship from a variety of fields.

“This curriculum consists of arrangements that ground student empowerment...” -Once again, this is apparently above my head. What does “ground student empowerment” mean?

“Old situations are good for practice, but the test is how students perform under new circumstances. That is the only way to test skills apart from content.” -This is also unclear. How exactly are skills being “tested?” What way is the “only” way?

“...the challenge is naming and defining skills we want students to learn, not confusing skills with their outcomes.” -Why is naming and defining skills so difficult? Did I miss something?

“Citizenship and leadership develop where students build and facilitate conditions for human flourishing, including practices of listening, turn-taking, and non-violent conflict resolution along with respect for difference. Citizen-scholars are guided in their leadership by scholarly values of unlimited inquiry, transparency of method and assumptions, and the free flow of information.” -Beyond being nauseatingly saccharine, this paragraph is likewise a non-sequitur that seems to have little connection to the material above and below it.

“Honors College faculty members are charged with attracting outstanding students to UCA by establishing and maintaining a reputation for excellence in academic and co-curricular programming...” What is “academic programming?”

In reviewing interdisciplinary learning we are told: “John Dewey at Columbia University and Arthur O. Lovejoy at Johns Hopkins University were the leading lights of a third approach...” In the next paragraph Norb Schedler is credited with inventing “a third way.” This is confusing. Did Dr. Schedler actually invent a fourth way, or did he just copy Dewey?

What does “meta-cognitive reflection” mean? Is it like a parallel disjunctive co-inebriation or a semi-articulated inductive semantic?

“From its inception, the Honors College has both depended upon and actively sought partnerships with faculty from other departments.” -The older faculty in my department strongly dispute the idea that the Honors College has actively sought partnerships with other faculty from the beginning. Quite to the contrary, one senior faculty member in my department, Jim Brodman, argues that he was instrumental in helping the Honors College get started but was never invited back to teach there after assigning a grade which Norb Schedler thought was too severe. He has told me that he is willing to discuss this and other episodes related to the Honors College in more detail with anyone who is interested.

“...it is the policy of the Honors College to benefit both our students' learning experiences and the non-Honors UCA faculty's teaching experiences by continuing to offer teaching opportunities in Honors to several non-Honors faculty members each year.” -Again, the assumption here is that other faculty should be standing in line to teach at the Honors College, not that the Honors College should reach out to other faculty. How many ‘repeat’ outside faculty members does the Honors College actually get? I do not personally know of any faculty members who have taught there and still have a desire to do so again. In my particular department the three faculty members who have taught in the Honors College remember it as a negative experience, largely because of the low grade-vs.-effort expectations. In my own case it was the singularly most unpleasant class I have taught at UCA. On one occasion Norb Schedler actually refused to give me entrance to a classroom which was filled with students waiting for me to come and teach them. He was no longer the Director of the Honors College so I do not know what authority he acted under, nor did he explain why he took these actions. I assume it was because he did not recognize me. Having said this, I *should* mention that both Rick Scott and Donna Bowman were very professional in my dealings with them.

THE HONORS COLLEGE

TENURE AND PROMOTION STANDARDS, PROCEDURES, AND GUIDELINES (“Attachment #2” apparently?)

“The Honors College values scholarship in all its forms—teaching, research/creative activity, and service.” -I am somewhat surprised at this and am not sure my particular college would see all four of these (teaching, research, creative activity, service) as scholarship. I cannot speak for other colleges or departments but amongst my peers scholarship equals research and publication. Teaching and service are important aspects of our careers, but are not defined as *scholarship* per se.

Much of the other material in here seems repetitive of Attachment 1 above, so I shall conclude my review without repeating any further comments.