

Honors College Response Paper

I write this contribution to the Honors College discussion reluctantly, given my friendships with several of its faculty and my respect for their hard work. I believe, however, that this discussion may have broader implications for how UCA conceives of the undergraduate academic experience and how faculty relate to and interact with each other. First, let me say that I believe that the Honors College contributes tremendously by attracting talented students to UCA and providing them with specialized curricula appropriate to their learning needs. There are, however, numerous problems with the current isolation of the Honors College that undermine student experience and do a disservice to its faculty. Put simply, the current structure of the Honors College isolates both faculty and students by limiting interdisciplinary coursework to a select few and failing to enrich the larger campus community. The Honors College needs to be accountable to, not isolated from, the traditional colleges. It should be integrated in such a way that it enriches students and faculty across campus. While there are many points in the Honors College paper to which one could mount a vigorous response, I will try to limit myself to the main issue: the nature of faculty appointment.

While I understand the past staffing issues that have contributed to the Honors College's desire to assure its "autonomy," honors is not a field but a pedagogy—an approach to learning but not a field. As its name suggests, "interdisciplinary studies" is not a discipline but exists as a linkage between disciplines. The Honors College's position paper seems to concede this point, indicating that the College is designed "to foster student autonomy through instruction and practice in flexible problem solving skills. This pedagogy requires the participation of instructors with special interest and continuing training in disintermediation, project-based learning, and cross-disciplinary activities." I believe that many faculty may view this pedagogy as narrow and restrictive, a point that I have heard from many students in the Honors College. Must every class directly contribute to the development of citizen-scholars? Does every class have to engage in experiential learning to be appropriate to students in the Honors College? It seems facetious to suggest that students cannot engage in interdisciplinary learning and growth through a lecture by an engaging leading scholar in his/her field. Pedagogy is about experimentation and reaching the students one has. Disintermediation, as discussed in the Honors College paper, is a tool, but it is not the tool box. Sometimes we must acknowledge that there are right and wrong answers, and faculty sometimes should play a central role as arbiters of the truth. Experimentation with pedagogies like disintermediation predicated on student-centered learning involves risk and risk sometimes leads to failure. I believe that it is fundamentally unfair to put often inexperienced, new, untenured faculty in the position of experiential and experimental teaching where the achievement of promotion and tenure is directly tied to the success of these efforts. Such an arrangement is exploitative in that it undermines their development of a scholarly record and their engagement in appropriate service to the university and larger community, outside of the Honors College. At the same time, it may undermine their marketability should they choose to leave UCA or be denied tenure because their engagement in co-curricular activities comes at a cost to one's discipline-specific achievements in teaching and research.

The Honors College position paper makes gestures in the direction of academic accountability but they are just that. The inclusion of one member from outside the Honors College strikes of tokenism and is not a solution to the real issue. While it is true that a change in the future appointment of Honors College faculty will add to the “evaluative complexity” of Honors College faculty, we should be reminded of why we are where we are. The appointment to tenured and tenure-track positions in the Honors College has been achieved without campus debate or discussion. It was a by-product of UCA’s bid to be removed from AAUP censure, a goal that required the elimination of the 302 contracts that were prevalent in the Honors College. The sunset clause developed in 2005 is a response to a failed process, a process by which faculty were “hired” to tenure-track appointments in Honors even as there was neither campus discussion of this new type of appointment nor a procedure in place to evaluate them for tenure. The sunset clause has served its purpose. It has ensured that a real discussion will now occur.

If UCA truly wants to provide the best possible education to future students in the Honors College, we should seek to provide these students with the largest variety of experiences and experienced instructors possible. As a result, I believe that in the future, only tenured faculty should have full-time appointment in the Honors College. By having achieved tenure, faculty members have already established their credentials as scholars and their abilities in the classroom. They can afford to take risks and fail just as they can consciously choose to concentrate their energies on teaching and co-curricular learning. I applaud the Honors College’s willingness to “offer arrangements to senior, tenured faculty,” but do not understand why such arrangements are per force associated with “late-career” faculty. I imagine a university that recognizes and welcomes, along with Boyer, that faculty careers have stages and that we, as an institution, can respond productively to a faculty members’ need for renewal, their desire to concentrate on their teaching or to engage in residential learning. Tenured faculty from academic departments could be appointed full-time to the Honors College for a period of 3-5 years and then return to their academic department, bringing renewed energy and engagement, and the ability to enrich their departmental colleagues and students with what they learned while appointed in the Honors College. This vision of faculty appointment is not meant to be prescriptive but descriptive. In addition to tenured faculty with a multi-year appointment in Honors, I believe that the University must seek to institutionalize agreements by which faculty may teach 1-4 courses in the Honors College. Such clear agreements benefit the Honors College, academic departments, and the individual faculty member.

In conclusion, these ideas should not be viewed as an absolute vision of what the Honors College must be, but what it could be. I believe that as more full-time faculty are engaged in the Honors College, students and faculty across campus will benefit. I am also hopeful that our incoming Provost’s positive experiences with dual appointments can contribute additional ideas that may allay the Honors College’s concerns with the adoption of this common practice. While the ideas expressed herein are often the result of conversations with colleagues across campus, they describe the truth that I see and no one else’s.

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