

Response to the Honors College Position Paper

Introduction:

The basic claim the Honors College makes in its position paper is that the Honors College is being unfairly deprived of the ability to hire, tenure, and promote its own faculty. The Honors College goes on to argue that it needs a “core” faculty, that its needs are unique and distinctive, that its “core” faculty is, in fact, a true faculty, that is, a group of professionals bound together by a common body of knowledge and common academic purpose. In short, the Honors College argues that it is the equivalent of a department, the body of faculty entrusted with making decisions about hiring, tenure, and promotion, as well as course content, and not some more arbitrary and loosely organized academic entity like a college, whose purpose is more purely administrative. I understand that the Honors College has much to say about its mission, and I’ll address that subject a little later on, but the crux of the Honors College argument rests on its claim that it ought to enjoy the same ability to hire, tenure, and promote as other departments.

Autonomy:

Unfortunately, the Honors College muddies the waters of its own argument a bit by saying that it wants autonomy. The fact is, no department has autonomy. Departments are empowered to make hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions and to determine their curriculum, but all these decisions are also subject to other considerations, some involving the college the departments are in and some involving the university as a whole. If the Honors College’s desire for autonomy is taken at face value, it is asking for something no one else has, rather than something it alone does not have.

The Honors College further complicates matters by using the vague term “academic unit,” rather than department. The position paper claims that all other academic units in the university have the ability to hire, tenure, and promote, but the term is so vague it could include all of the interdisciplinary programs in the university (Gender Studies, African/African-American Studies, which offers a major, Southern Studies, the Humanities Institute, just to name a few), none of which is able to hire, tenure, and promote. It seems clear from the direction the position paper takes that the Honors College is not really interested in being considered an academic unit (which could mean anything from a program to the entire university) but, instead, wants to be considered a department. The only question is: is it?

This is a more important question than it may seem at first glance, because departments are the places where faculty make the two most fundamental professional decisions we make: what our curriculum will be and whom we shall hire and tenure. These decisions are made by departments **because** departments comprise faculty members with shared academic knowledge and competence. Therefore, departments are the logical places where the most important decisions should be made. If these decisions were to be relocated to some more arbitrarily organized body, like a college, the very nature of the decisions made would necessarily be different because the people involved would have different areas of expertise and different professional commitments. Decisions about hiring and tenure as well as decisions about curriculum couldn’t help but be made for largely administrative and expedient reasons, since a

college, unlike a department, exists for the sake of administrative convenience and not to house people who share a common expertise and professional commitments. This is one reason it is so important to preserve and protect the integrity and authority of departments. Once decisions about curriculum, hiring, and tenure originate somewhere else, faculty control over the most essential parts of our professional lives is lost.

So, is the Honors College, despite its name, a department and not a college? The answer is, I believe, no, for how can a collection of people from different disciplines be a department? How can they share a common expertise and professional commitment? The Honors College answers that the common expertise and professional commitment is interdisciplinarity. This may seem like a perfectly reasonable answer, but it isn't. It obscures the fact that interdisciplinary studies are an application of traditional disciplines and, for that reason, cannot really be considered disciplines in themselves. This is one reason it is customary for faculty who have degrees in interdisciplinary studies (like American Studies, for example) to have appointments in traditional departments, like, say, History or English. The competence of these people, and especially their teaching qualifications, falls into one discipline or another, and this is where they work. A faculty member may branch out into other areas, but such intellectual curiosity, commendable in itself, would not qualify that faculty member to make hiring decisions based on their interests. The Honors College admits as much when they promise to involve people from traditional departments, "borrowed" faculty, in searches and tenure decisions.

So, the idea that there could be a Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, which seems to be what the Honors College wants to be, doesn't make much sense. It is, in many ways, a contentless abstraction. Any department, to be a department in any meaningful sense, must be a group of people who have and know a specific field sufficiently well to be able to make intelligent decisions about hiring, tenure, and curriculum, and this doesn't seem to be the case in the Honors College. Instead, the Honors College seems to be a collection of people bound by their commitment, not to a discipline, but to the Honors College itself, and that is not an academic commitment. At best, it is a commitment to an idea about what education might be and, at worst, it is simply a commitment to ambition masquerading as high-mindedness.

Mission:

This brings us to the mission of the Honors College. The Honors College makes much of its mission and what it calls the "honors movement," and it's good to think highly of what we do, but the truth is the mission of the Honors College is whatever the university, through its faculty governing bodies, says it is. Moreover, there is nothing about the mission of the Honors College that requires removing the sunset clause and allowing it to hire its own core faculty. In fact, in the endnotes section of the Honors College position paper, the National Collegiate Honors Council does not list the hiring of core faculty as a necessary feature of an honors college. The fact that only five other universities in the country follow such a practice is a pretty good additional indication that there is no necessity for one.

Besides, for all of the breathless claims and labored abstractions, the Honors College really is engaged in the same work the rest of us are. There is simply no reason it cannot get its faculty from other departments, just as it always has. If getting faculty from other departments becomes

difficult, that might be a sign that UCA can no longer afford to have an Honors College, that enrollments are too high and faculty stretched too thin. The solution to that problem is more hiring of tenure-track faculty university-wide, not the building of a core faculty in a college that serves less than 4% of the student body.

Existing Tenured Faculty:

While it is true that the Honors College already has three tenured faculty members, the history provided by the Honors College of the hiring and tenuring of those faculty members is a little incomplete. According to the position paper:

Although we sought to hire tenure-track faculty, we did not receive permission to do so. We conducted national searches, nonetheless, using a search committee of faculty who had taught with the Honors College on a recurring basis and were familiar with our mission and practices (from the Departments of English and Writing). Initially we were allowed to offer non-tenure-track positions based on Board Policy 3023 (non-tenure-track renewable annually with a three-year contract). Three faculty members were hired under this arrangement between 1999 and 2001.

In June of 2003, the newly revised UCA Faculty Handbook was put into place as UCA was removed from AAUP censure. A major change concerned the Policy 302 positions. These could now be converted to tenure-track positions, provided that the faculty member desired it. Honors College faculty members and administrators had been among those actively lobbying the newly installed Hardin Administration for this change. The three faculty members affected by it quickly asked that their contracts be converted to tenure-track status.

So far, so good. However, what this account leaves out is that the Board Policy 302 positions were put in place by the Thompson Administration in order to undermine tenure and were one of the reasons the Thompson Administration was put on the AAUP censure list. (For those who don't know what Board Policy 302 positions were, they offered faculty more money to forego tenure. The Thompson Administration's hope was that enough younger faculty would accept this deal so that tenure itself would eventually become irrelevant.) In other words, the Honors College did not scruple to avail itself of academic positions that were being used to attack tenure, even though it now wants to hire and tenure faculty.

When Win Thompson left UCA and negotiations were begun to get UCA off the AAUP censure list, the subject to the Board Policy 302 positions naturally came up. Despite the fact that these positions had been devised to undermine tenure, the negotiating team felt that the faculty who had accepted these positions ought to be treated generously and given the opportunity to choose a tenure-track position, if such were available and appropriate. This is the reason the non-tenure-track positions in the Honors College were converted to tenure-track positions. Had the committee decided to let the faculty who chose Board Policy 302 positions stew in their own juices, there would not be tenured faculty in the Honors College. Furthermore, the very existence

of the sunset clause shows that the tenuring of the existing faculty in the Honors College was intended to be a one-time arrangement and not a precedent.

In light of this history, it is a little odd that the Honors College would cite the AAUP in defending its desire to hire and tenure its own faculty. As I understand the AAUP's position on the tenuring of faculty in interdisciplinary studies programs, the organization wishes to protect the rights of individual faculty members but is very concerned that interdisciplinary programs can, because they are not departments, weaken or undermine the faculty's role in hiring and tenure decisions. On balance, the Honors College desire to hire and tenure its own faculty runs counter to the wishes of AAUP, since such an arrangement makes hiring and tenure a question for colleges and not departments.

Conclusion:

There are no good reasons to remove the sunset clause from the agreement reached in 2004-2005 and many very good reasons to keep it. The Honors College has failed to show that it is anything other than what its name designates. It is an administrative rather than an academic unit, to use their own unfortunate terminology. Its mission is, at bottom, the same as the mission we all have: to educate our students to the best of our abilities. While the Honors College may have some special requirements because of its mission, almost all of these are nonacademic, such as recruiting and staging functions. There is simply no need, at least none that has been demonstrated, for the Honors College to hire a core faculty. I'm sure it would be nice and that it would serve the ambitions of the Honors College to have a core faculty all its own, but the ambition and vanity of the Honors College are not reasons to undermine the few areas where faculty still have a significant say in their professional lives.

Richard Gaughan

English Department