

Honors College Critique

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Introduction

I've written this paper in the hopes that I can bring the attention of Dr.Gimme (Director of the Honors College) and members of the honors college community, to what I believe to be a very serious set of issues with the current state of Southern's Honors College. If you are not connected to the southern's Honors college I ask that you please do not read further than the intro to this paper. Much of the content in this piece of writing will be pointing out an ugly side to something I care deeply about, and I'd rather not reveal such thoughts to the public without the permission of the Honors College.

With that said I'll assume that going forward that either you, Dr.Gimme are reading this paper or someone who is connected to the Honors college. I want to preface this paper with two things before going into the meat of the matter. One is that this will be a long and in depth critique so I ask, if you intend to read it that you allocate time to digest the ideas and thoughts I've written in one sitting. As you can probably tell I put time into this and not because some class gave out a vague assignment like, "improve your local community". I really think we can do better and I want us to do better, but more than that I think we can do better for less effort than we currently are exhausting.

The second is that this is a criticism and do to that I will be uncomfortably blunt at times with my transparency. But, I want to let you know this comes from a place of care. Honestly, I do not think Southern is a good school and unlike the Honors college education I don't think my opinion can do anything about it.

But, the Honors college is different in that it actually has potential to do wonders. Anyone who just wants a degree can go to the regular college, get there evidence of being worth something and go join a given industry. On the other hand, The Honors College could be something for scholars and those students who aren't just trying to enter the work force but truly study for the sake of studying and wish to learn about the world do to sincere interest.

This paper will include the following, a description as to why the current organization and over all staff structure of the Honors college is failing. A Break down of what the current curriculum is missing or attempting, but failing to do this semester. And an explanation of social and cultural problems that are inhibiting the Honors College. In addition to describing and explaining these problems I will also be writing my thoughts on solutions for each set of problems. I hope that even if the Honors College does not respond to my criticism that you at least took the time to read it and hear what I had to say.

The Critiques

1 Organization and Over All Staff Structure

When I transitioned from being a regular student into the honors college I felt really unique at first. Not because I was in the Honors College, but because I was getting so much attention from the director of the Honors College, in other words you. The reason I thought this was so strange and flattering was because I figured you had a million more things to do, and had someone else who's job it was to deal with student relations and was perfectly capable of handling my transition. I came to learn that only one part of that previous sentence was true. You do in fact have a million things to do, what you did not have was any one else to help you.

This is beyond a disaster in terms of infrastructure. Not just does this keep a tight leash on what the Honors College could ever possibly do but, it makes it so that it barely is capable of what it is doing right now. How can anyone expect you to produce a stimulating and well polished curriculum if you must simultaneously deal with every single individual students problems. This concentration of responsibility at one focal point makes for three problems.

One is that there is so much pressure at that one focal point that who ever currently occupies it will be under an unhealthy and work limiting pressure. Most aspirations will never be reached do to the sheer responsibility's on this persons shoulders and who ever the current director is, probably wont last as long as they should because of the magnitude of the burden. I might be wrong but when I speak with you in a one to one conversation I find you to be physically and mentally exhausted to an unsafe point. Although, I selfishly point this out because it negatively effects me, you should also consider how it negatively effects yourself.

The second is that all other parts on the system will grow weak and inefficient. Those other parts of the system being actively teaching professors. Most have no knowledge as to the direction the program is taking or information on program wide events. Without students being able to just ask their professors what is currently occurring in the honors college, two main problems arrive. One is miss communication like what happened with last semester's final project and it's due date. The other is how late information gets to all parties that require it. Like how volunteers for the essay day were given their schedule the day before at 8:45 pm.

Finally and I'd argue the worst of the three, is that in the case that this focal point is removed abruptly the entire program falls to pieces. Having so much importance and functionality at one spot produces a one blow Achilles heel kind of weakness for the whole organization. As you have probably discovered when you are sick the honors college goes into a panic with every single part of it being left in the dark.

No one will be happy in such a system and eventually it will fall apart with students deciding they had enough. That or the program will continue while cultivating hate in the students for the program.

2 Issues Within The Curriculum

Unlike the previous section the issues within the Honors College curriculum are numerous and for the most part unrelated. The fact that there are so many problems could suggest a common root problem, however at the present time I fail to see one. Since there are so many issues without connection this section will be a list of those issues as well as an explanation as to how they effect the honors college.

2.1 In Class Discussion

A staple in any Honors College program should be the in class discussion. It's something that has been forgotten about in the standard college curriculum and in addition to being not used often, it is also arguably the most useful part of a curriculum. Solidifying what students have come to learn so far in the semester, as well as informing the instructor of the course how well the class is digesting the given information. And, yet we don't properly put it into practice in the Honors College curriculum. What's worse is that the program advertises the idea of discussion in the curriculum without actually implementing it correctly. What actually replaces class discussions are what I call, "interactive lectures". The professor address the audience and speaks with every three to four sentences pausing to ask the audience a question. This takes the core purpose of the discussion out of the picture being an exchange of ideas among peers. It also forces one side of the conversation to have complete control of the direction the conversation takes. Taking away a students experience in an actual conversation removes their potential for learning how to properly instigate and manage a discussion for the future. An interactive lecture also does a great job at discouraging students from speaking. No one wants to speak in a conversation where the opposing party has inherently more value than yourself.

2.2 Projects

The second issue in the Honors College curriculum would have to be the use of projects. I would divide the issue of projects into two main points. One is that the use of projects has in my experience been very poor and used as a substitute for a lack of content in a curriculum. Second, is that even if projects are composed properly, which I've yet to see, most students in the honors college fail at executing them properly. To showcase what I mean by the average Honors College project replacing actual content I will point out and elaborate on the use of two projects. The first is the HON 203-plenary creative community project. This project was the equivalent to a twenty year old's show&tell, but with the theme of community. The actual description of the project was to describe a community that we just made in an abstract and artistic method with groups as big as 25. Resulting in a course where two of the, under six, groups broke the rules by presenting with a PowerPoint(which was explicitly explained to be not an accepted median for presentation). And, every group failed by not presenting on their own group community and instead focused on the idea of a community in general, not the particular one they created as a group, my group included. This was because the original description of the project was simply impossible to execute,

resulting in each group just not being able to accomplish the assignment. If the goal of the project is to express, in an artistic way, a community that you just created for the project, one will find themselves in a paradox. To express a community you must learn about how it works through observation. But, this community is about doing the project itself, so you are observing yourself observing yourself. This is the perfect example of a paradox, since it becomes a never ending loop. The worst part was that the instructors of the course failed to bring this issue up and chose to comply with the students failures, completely changing the goal of the project since none of them were doing it, but treated the situation as if nothing out of the ordinary occurred. Failing to address the issue shows a lack of honesty and respect from the faculty towards the students. I'm not suggesting that professors fail everyone in the class, my point is that this should have been brought up as oppose to swept under the rug. To simplify, the course was able to technically have something written in it's curriculum that was never actually implemented but was played off as if it was.

The second example would be a project in my HON 202 called the Protest Song project. This project includes researching a song and the production of a 72 second rap piece on any subject we wish under the condition that it is a form of protest, and we don't use vulgar language. If this course was part of the music department I would understand why this project was in the curriculum, but this is an honors college where students don't need to learn how to perform. The opposing argument can suggest that it is the fact that the student is showing a protest of some kind that is important not the quirky and fun art form that is the median for communication. But, there are so many options where a student can express protest at a current issue and do it seriously as oppose to making the issue less serious with how it's delivered and limiting how much the protester can say and really elaborate. The original subject of the course is history but with assignments like these in the curriculum the class barely goes beyond the surface level and ends up producing a high school level history course with fun musical anecdotes thrown in. A quick way to identify if a project is a waste of time in most cases in the honors college, is if you can imagine the project being done by a middle school student, which in both of these cases I can.

The last crucial weak point to using projects in the honors college is that students don't do them correctly. One would be accurate in saying most projects done by honors college students are throw-ups of information from online articles supporting opinions that are pre-made before the research. Until the honors college fixes how students currently undertake class project. The use of projects will be of no benefit to students in an academic setting. Our end of the year presentation in the spring semester of 2018 was my first time experiencing an end of the year event in the honors college. I can say with out a doubt after speaking to many of the students that this event felt awful. This was because an almost real research seminar was created for a bunch of projects that were improved in a two day span. The students were given admiration and were celebrated for accomplishing what most of them knew were sloppy works which for most people is a bad feeling of guilt. This resulted in an awkward and tension building end of the year event.

2.3 STEM & History

The last issue of the honors college would probably be the lack of STEM and History courses in the curriculum. This seems both odd and intentional and at this moment I'm not confident in pointing out why that is. I'm focusing on this lack because I think that now a days, students in higher education need STEM and history based classes more than ever and any liberal education would be incomplete without them.

When I speak about STEM I'm not referring to the basic algebra, engineers calculus class, or chemistry. I do not believe that STEM is a needed subject because there are formulas that every student must memorize. Instead, I believe that the perspective of thinking in STEM is something every student must know. It is literally the pillar of thinking that built the modern world. Examples of these are discrete math, logic, Boolean algebra, game theory, geometry, statistics, information theory, and number theory. Students don't even necessarily need to apply the subject themselves in real world scenarios. The core component is understanding what STEM based topics do in the 21st century and how does one think in the subject. For example a class could look at the Pareto Distribution, a math model that originally described the distribution of wealth within a population, and explain the background of who made it, and how they made it, what it tells us about human populations with wealth, and lastly talk about what it evolved into. All of that can be done without ever having a student actually use the model on a population. And to reiterate, it is not important that all students can accurately apply such models, it is important that they know what they are, and what they do, and how they do it. I have found it absolutely terrifying to discover how little my peers know about STEM based subjects like math, biology, chemistry, and astronomy. This is by all means a bad outcome of the honors college and a symptom we should rectify.

History on the other hand is less straight forward of a problem. What I found among my peers within the subject of history is a general understanding of American history and a lack of knowledge in anything else. I first caught a glimpse of it by accident last semester in my HON 202 where at the start of the course the instructor asked how familiar students were with European history. Not a single person, excluding myself, said they were even slightly knowledgeable on the subject. At first I assumed that most students were just shy and did not want to call attention to themselves. However, I slowly learned that I was wrong, and that most of the class seriously was not well versed in the subject. This realization came when less than one third of the class recognized the Declaration of the rights of Man. A document that I would argue is probably mentioned in all curriculum's that cover Western civilization. Unlike most of the problems in this paper I do not have a solution for this one. I assume that these students have had history courses in the past and if they did not connect then, I have no reason to believe they will connect now.

3 Problems with Social Structure

The last and probably most difficult problem, is the current social structure of the Honors College. This issue unlike the rest is directly connected with people and therefore can not just be reconstructed by an outside force. In addition to that, any critique of social systems is very easily taken as a personal grudge or resentment, so being able to properly get the problem across is very difficult. This section will discuss the current relationship between students and teaching staff, students and students, and the general feeling that students have for the honors college.

The relationship between teaching staff and students within the honors college is one of the most awkward relationships I have ever personally witnessed. It's a relationship of built up praise directed towards students who don't think they deserve it. I've found many professors constantly reference the fact that the class they currently are teaching is a class of honors college students, and that they are particularly hard workers. I've also found most students to find this both over exaggerated and uncomfortable. For example, at the

end of a semester it's common for the honors college to set up a large academic event. In the fall semester of 2017 apparently students were informed that they could bring family and or friends to this event to witness the work they have done over the semester. literally all the discussions I've had with students have described a dislike for this option, because it suggested that the event was really important, and many of them admitted to barely putting any effort into their projects. Every student I've ever spoken to described their freshmen year as the only time they felt challenged. The whole atmosphere of the Honors College is a epitome of juxtaposition made of two opposite feelings colliding, one being pride and greatness from the administration and the other mediocrity from students. Students in general don't view the Honors College in the same light as the administration speaks of it, and that difference creates a divide in the student to professor relationship.

The student peer to peer relationship is equally unhealthy but for completely different reasons. Students just don't seem connected with one another in the academic setting. I can't speak for dorm life because I was a commuter, however in the classroom most students behaved in a manner that cut them off from the majority of other students in the room, sticking to a clique of 2 or just to themselves, in short there was no sense of community among Honors College students. This is partly because there are nearly no events within the Honors College for students apart from mandatory curriculum events. In my time as a Honors College student I had only heard of two events that were Honors College related but not related to a particular curriculum. One was the trip to the Yale Art Museum which do to communication issues was a bust and the essay day. In this case either the Honors College has barely anything to bring students together or there is a failure in communicating events taking place in the Honors College. The last part to student relations is how the student body feels in general about their average peer. Most students just don't respect each other and I can kinda see why. Students just don't talk to each other, and so most of them can only make judgments of character by surface level information. It leaves most students to dislike each other since all they have connect with each other are superficial conversations.

The final problem in the Honors College is that no one likes the Honors college. Or to be more accurate the students in the Honors College have been upset with the program for a while and their frustration has been building up. Through out this critique I point out discussions I've had with my peers and trends that I find among them. It is the very fact, that this paper is built on those conversations that shows this problem to both exist and be extremely potent. So one could guess, from following the paper to this point that this issue is in fact the case. Simply, students are unhappy and that effects how they are mentally, the effort they place in their classes, and how much they get out of them. It just adds to every other problem mentioned before, evolving that problem to be more effective and impeding the goals of the program at every turn. This problem is one that can be found in all schools and it usually stems from the students feeling like their concerns are not heard from the administration. In this particular case the students have never actually formally presented their concerns, they merely talk about it in small social circles. Creating an expectation that can never be met, because how can you expect someone to fix a problem they have never been informed about.

Solutions

0.1 Solutions for organization and structure

(in the works)

Solutions For The Curriculum

(in the works)

Social Solutions

(in the works)