

Education, Excellence, and Democracy

As described in Susanna Finnell's Presidential Address, the original Kettering Foundation-National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) partnership not only contributed significantly to national deliberation on higher education, it helped many in Honors reflect more deeply on the relationship between Honors and larger public issues. The issue booklet, Preparing for a Good Future: What Kind of Education Do We Need after High School? prepared under the leadership of Bill Gwin, has inspired several ideas for exciting new directions for the Kettering-NCHC partnership. I am pleased to be involved in one of these new projects and to have the opportunity to say something about it here.

*With a working title of "Education, Excellence, and Democracy," the preliminary framing for this new project presents four choices, four different models of the correct role for Honors in higher education: 1. Selecting and Training Professional Leaders, 2. Developing Responsible Citizens, 3. Reviving Moral Authority, and 4. Realizing Fair Opportunities for All. Such important recent works as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, and Benjamin Barber's *An Aristocracy of Everyone* have contributed to this framing. So have many articles in Honors publications and countless conversations at Honors meetings over the years. As a starting point, the framing has the virtue of combining philosophical breadth and depth with practical immediacy.*

*The philosophical dimension lies in the links between competing notions of educational excellence and competing visions of democracy, a crucial issue in American education at all levels. With another NIF issue booklet *Governing America*, in mind, we might say our issue is, What kinds of educational excellence would help address the current failure of American democracy? In other words, though this issue focuses on educational quality, a defining concern of Honors programs, its purview actually extends as far as the society's concern for excellence and democracy.*

The practical immediacy of the framing for those in Honors lies in its direct relevance to the day-to-day operation of Honors programs and of the NCHC. Questions of how to define and pursue excellence are at the root of all programmatic decisions in Honors. Whose excellence and what kind of excellence should come first? What should the priorities of a program be? Of course these practical decisions are faced in elementary and secondary schools as much as in colleges, community arts programs, and community hospitals. Wherever organizations have the public's business as part of their business, the issue of excellence and democracy matters.

One of the unique strengths of this project, I believe, will be its ability to link, for many of the participants in deliberations, broad philosophical issues with pressing practical matters about which they will actually have to decide. While Hannah Arendt certainly illuminated the idea of the public by means of a hard and fast dichotomy between the public world, on the one hand, and society and community on the other, there are good reasons for seeing the matter differently. Arendt's notion of public space becomes a

kind of ideal type used to illuminate the dimension of publicness and public work in a wide variety of deliberative groups, even including those enmeshed in social and economic activities. Recognizing and cultivating these dimensions of publicness are important because doing so fosters and supports the capacity of citizens for public work wherever they are. Furthermore, such deliberations can publicize the work of the organization so as to enrich the truly public work of the larger community. Certainly a democratic polity requires these sorts of mutually reinforcing relationships between its public and civil lives.

The first implementation of our preliminary framing will be at the annual retreat of the NCHC executive council this spring. For this deliberation, the framing will focus on the priorities of Honors programs and of the NCHC in relation to basic assumptions about educational excellence and democracy. Immediately following the retreat, deliberations will continue via a specially created listserv accessible through the Internet. For this electronic deliberation, the focus of the preliminary framing will be broadened to include issues of educational excellence at all levels. Thus, such currently controversial topics as inclusion, tracking, mainstreaming, school finance, cultural literacy, multiculturalism, charter schools, and vouchers will be brought into the deliberations — all of them related to the broad issue of educational excellence and democracy. And given the broad applicability of this issue to organizational practice, efforts will be made to involve diverse groups and organizations in the deliberations, from school boards to arts administrators, and from parent-teacher organizations to social service agencies.

Because the National Issues Forums format is based on a model of democratic deliberation, use of that format within organizations like the NCHC that strive for democracy may well contribute to a renewed and strengthened ability to act. Through the power of deliberations to explore underlying values and to examine realistically the costs and benefits of policies, an “organization forum” may generate a deeper and more nuanced understanding of organizational common ground, leading to strengthened institutional voice and action. With these possibilities in mind, we will be looking for opportunities to conduct forums in the widest possible variety of settings: at in-service programs for teachers, in high school classes, on colleges campuses, and at meetings of national educational, arts, social service, and community development organizations.

Beyond the expectation that a new issue booklet will eventually result and that framing deliberations will be conducted with the widest possible diversity of participants and organization settings, plans beyond this spring have not yet been finalized. As we continue to develop plans, your comments, suggestions, and offers to become involved will be eagerly welcomed. Please feel free to contact me at Honors Program, Lock Haven University, Lock Haven, PA 17745, 717-893-2491 (jknauer@eagle.lhup.edu).

By Jim Knauer

“... our findings indicate that the public’s concern is not primarily about cost, but about the nature of education itself.”

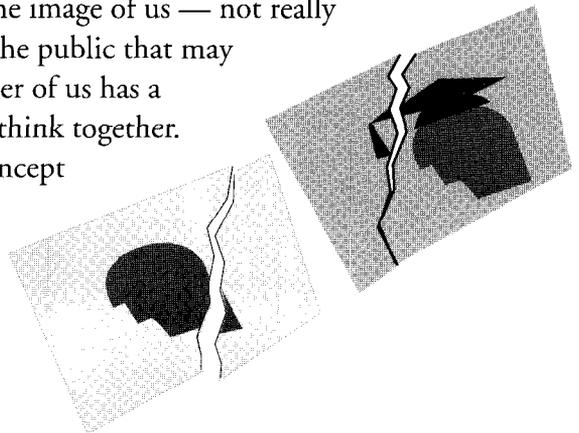
Within the same week, the report was distributed to a congressional committee on the National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education. Although our report does not directly address issues of cost, our findings indicate that the public’s concern is not primarily about cost, but about the nature of education itself — that is, “What kind of education do we need?”

The Kettering Foundation mailed the report, with a detailed, explanatory letter, to the Secretary of Education, Richard Riley. I quote from that letter: “This project, which promises to continue over several years, marks the beginning of a very different dialogue between people within educational institutions and the rest of the citizenry. This has interesting implications at a time when higher education is being challenged to justify what it does.”

It is important that we understand the significance of these events — the confluence of forces that will lead us into the next century stronger than we have ever been. We may feel a tendency at this point to sit back, pat ourselves on the back, and let it go at that. We had our day in the sun, our 15 minutes of fame. Now let’s get back to the business we know best — running our Honors programs and working with our students.

I challenge you to see the possibilities in what has just happened. More significant than the report itself — it is, after all, a snapshot in time that quickly becomes old news — is the fact that we have incorporated a revolutionary tool into our Honors world — the tool of deliberation. It is not that foreign to our philosophy of teaching and learning, which we see as intertwined and complementary. Just think what we have accomplished with this tool: higher education is grappling with how to define itself to the public at large. The public has one image of us — not really accurate. We have a view of the public that may well be equally flawed. Neither of us has a good handle on how we can think together.

This tool, the forum concept of public deliberation on issues that are indeed public and important, may be the key to moving our organization forward. We CAN have a direct conversation with the citizens of this country. We CAN come closer together in understanding what higher education is all about.



Ada Long, past president of NCHC, told us two years ago in her speech, “Honors as Neighborhood,” that “we can experiment with new ways of opening up our conversations, widening our loyalties, and deepening our responsibilities so that, instead of looking back to the old model of the neighborhood, we redefine our human connections in ways that cut across geography, class, and culture.”

With our National Issues Forums work, we have done exactly that. We have opened up a conversation with a different culture — the public, students, parents, the community. Through this process, we have placed ourselves squarely into the issues of the day. We have begun to redress our relationship with the public. Honors, 40 years ago, was born out of a pressing public need. Today, for Honors to earn the respect of our different constituents, we may need, once more, to place ourselves into the issues as they confront us through public needs.

“We have opened up a conversation with a different culture.”

There are always plenty of issues that exercise influence on us. One such issue facing us is affirmative action. Universities and colleges in California and Texas (where I work), operate under a different law from that of the rest of the country. With the Hopwood court decision and Proposition 209, they had to rethink their admissions, scholarships, and financial aid decisions virtually overnight. Twenty-seven states have referenda coming up about affirmative action. Diversity on campus and access of traditionally underrepresented groups will again become a critical issue within the next few years. With President Clinton’s commission on race relations, there will be a national dialogue on this issue. I ask myself, what role, if any, can Honors play in this? Can we — should we — insert ourselves into this dialogue? If so, how would we do it? There is no doubt in my mind that this question will become urgent and will need to be addressed in creative ways. Honors will not be shielded from it.

So I ask you, as I ask myself, can we do that? If we do that, how? One of the gratifying aspects of this conference has been to see the creative energies of so many people flow into this direction. Jim Knauer and his project on public deliberation about what excellence means in higher education is one such direction. Jack Dudley from Virginia Tech is trying to organize deliberate thinking around the issue of race and Honors. Both are finding

allies and partners. They are creating frameworks through which we can have these dialogues — it's like yeast that is added to flour and water, bubbles that will rise to the top. So I ask you again, should we do that? And I ask you to imagine all that this could mean, for each of us, for our programs, the NCHC, for the nation.

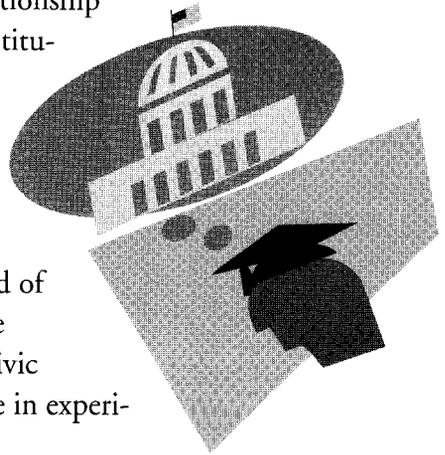
I believe, if we can in small ways incorporate public deliberation about any issue into our teaching and learning, we will be strengthening what, in the end, education in a democratic society is all about: creating citizens who practice knowing.

*This article is excerpted from the National Collegiate Honors Council
Presidential Address, October 25, 1997.*

LEARNING CIVIC EFFECTIVENESS

By Robert H. McKenzie

The nature of civic learning not only demands experiential education; civic learning reinforces for us the nature of experiential education. To explore the relationship between the two, we must understand a number of factors: the nature of the contemporary challenges to civic learning; the relationship of the purposes that educational institutions choose to that civic challenge; the pedagogical choices available for learning civically; and the relationship of learning theory to the centrality of choice that lies at the core of civic learning. At the end of this investigation, we will find some important guiding principles that civic learning suggests for how we engage in experiential education.



The Civic Challenge

The challenge that deliberative pedagogy addresses is enhancing civic capacity. Contemporary involvement in politics is predominantly angrily adversarial at one extreme or alarmingly absent at the other.

These extremes stem from a common root: too often, formal political processes treat citizens as consumers. When citizens begin to see themselves as consumers rather than as owners of government, they become passive. Critics describe them as apathetic. When spurred to action, citizens too often conceive of politics simply as influencing government to achieve partisan ends. The result is often adversarial gridlock, or at best, constantly shifting policies as first one group, then another, achieves a transient 51 percent majority. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the tendency of identity politics to overshadow common work to be done.