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The History of Honors in American Higher Education and Michigan State University

At the onset of this study, it is important to note some of the major issues surrounding honors education. Who should be educated and how? Are all students equal or are there differences in ability? What is a land grant institution's mission? These are some of the questions raised by discussing honors education nationally and at Michigan State University in particular. This analysis strives to explore these questions in a serious manner and provide a few possible answers. Moreover, by placing the story of the founding of the Michigan State University Honors College within the larger context of honors in American higher education, the pioneering nature of the Michigan State University Honors College will become apparent.

To begin a thorough study of the history of honors in American higher education, it seems important to define honors. Unfortunately, there is no solid definition to refer to. Over time, the concept of honors has progressed significantly. The first section of this paper is a study of that progression. Additionally, even though there has been some clear progression in the concept of honors, the ideas about the nature of honors in American higher education have always been, and still remain, amorphous, plentiful, and contested. While it may be frustrating to not have a clear conception of the definition of the major point of this study at the onset, this paper will strive to provide a complete picture of the history of honors in American higher education.

Honors in American Higher Education

The story of honors in American higher education is long and complicated. It is impossible to tell the whole story here, but an explication of some of the major historical markers will provide a context for understanding the unique and pioneering nature of the Honors College at Michigan State University.

There is no clean and definite date for the founding of honors in American higher education. As far back as 1873, Wesleyan awarded honors during commencement for a thesis and certain coursework (Aydelotte 1944, 47). Designation of a student's work as honors level based on a high grade point average or outstanding work on a thesis or complete course of study seems to be the earliest note of honors. There is documentation that at least a few colleges and universities were recognizing this form of honors in the late 19th century. In reality, many more may have been participating in this beginning stage of honors. In Aydelotte's 1925 study, "Honors Courses in American College and Universities", which is a chronicle of all honors programs existing at the time, the preface notes that "no attention is devoted to the well-nigh universal custom of awarding honors on the basis of a high average of grades in ordinary courses" (4). Between 1873 and 1925, the award of honors based on high grade point average had become almost universal. What had happened by 1925 that a study of honors in American higher education would not even document as honors the founding notion of it as doing well in coursework?

The most major and marked development that led to such a tremendous shift in the concept of honors was Frank Aydelotte's development of an honors program at Swarthmore College in 1921. Other colleges and universities were pursuing conceptions of honors as something other than notation of strong grades at the time, but many scholars see Aydelotte's

work as pioneering (Cohen 1966; “A New Era for Honors Programs”; Pennock). When Aydelotte began his presidency of Swarthmore College in 1921, he had already been thinking about a transformation of honors for some time. Aydelotte believed there was a fundamental problem in the nature of American higher education: the “regimentation of individuals of different levels of ability into the same program” (1944, 9). He called this “the academic lockstep” (1944, 12). Aydelotte expanded, saying

The academic system as ordinarily administered is for these better and more ambitious students a kind of lock step: it holds them back wastes their time and blunts their interest by subjecting them to a slow-moving routine which they do not need. It causes, furthermore, the atrophy of the qualities of independence and initiative in more gifted individuals by furnishing too little opportunity for their exercise. (1944, 14)

His ideas on a solution to this problem, namely an honors program, came primarily from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. At these institutions, more was expected from a gifted student. He was asked to do more and different work in a different way and was examined in a different manner as well. Aydelotte believed that only by freeing the gifted student from the strict regulations of the course and hour system could that student truly flourish (1944,15).

Thus, in 1921, Aydelotte inaugurated the honors program at Swarthmore College. The major tenets of the program included limitation to the second two years of the undergraduate program, seminar-style instruction that complemented enormous independent study, a philosophy that students should know a mandated “something” not take a mandated number of courses, and a major examination conducted by outsiders at the end of the students’ education. Each department had control over what content would be required for their students. (Aydelotte 1944, 30-44).

What, then, were the major philosophical education questions surrounding the founding of the Swarthmore College honors program and other honors programs? Also, what were some

of the social, economic, political and cultural forces at play that shaped this movement? After World War I, there was a huge increase in enrollments in high schools and colleges. As more students enrolled, educators were first made “aware of the vast range of individual differences” (Aydelotte 1944, 10). From that time on, many colleges and universities set forth to accommodate this wide range of difference. From the outset of the founding of honors programs, one criticism was voiced louder than the rest. How are these programs democratic and fair? Is it not illiberal and unfair to set aside more resources and better opportunities for gifted students? Should not all students have these opportunities and resources? The prevailing counterargument, voiced by Aydelotte and many other educators over the years, is that true anti-democracy and illiberalism is demonstrated by not providing for the gifted student. Aydelotte gracefully explained “we must learn to see the error in that superficial interpretation of democracy which assumes that all men are equal in intellectual ability. We must understand that in recognizing individual differences we are paying the truest homage to the worth of all individuals” (1944, 11). Aydelotte added “To many people democracy means equality, and equality means uniformity” and “one of the purposes of democracy is to provide each individual with the opportunity that is best for him. [...] The end of democracy should not to make men uniform, but rather to give them the freedom to be individuals” (1944, 19).

While Aydelotte hoped the Swarthmore College honors program would be the prototype and catalyst for the development of many more honors programs across the country, it is not clear that it was. Sources disagree about the extent to which the Swarthmore College honors program was adopted at private colleges and universities. There is agreement that the plan was clearly not imitated at public institutions (Cohen 1966; “A New Era for Honors Programs”). Overall, Aydelotte’s thoughts on honors were widely regarded and truly pioneering in American

higher education. His discussion of honors in American higher education and thoughtful analysis of the situation made lasting impacts on the subject.

The post-Swarthmore era saw enormous growth in the number and types of honors programs. In 1924 Aydelotte published a chronicle of all honors programs available in American higher education. The study included forty-four institutions. A second edition of this chronicle was published in 1925 and included ninety-three institutions. Some small part of the increase was due to information just becoming available, but for the most part this jump reflected true growth (Aydelotte 1925, 8). Additionally, “in 1929-30 approximately 37.5 percent of the institutions in the accredited list of the Association of American Universities were offering honors work” (Brumbaugh 234).

At this point it is important to take note of the diversity of honors programs across the landscape of American higher education, paying special attention to a few more important cases. Brumbaugh’s study noted that more than one-third of the institutions with honors work in 1929-30 only had twenty students or less participating (234). In some institutions honors work took as little as ten hours a week of a student’s time, while at other institutions, honors work took up sixty hours a week (Brumbaugh 234). Most studies of honors done between 1920 and 1960 categorize honors work in one of two ways: either as additional work or as special work that replaces regular work. Work generally means courses, but other things could be included, such as a thesis. The majority of honors programs were classified in the first category, unlike the Swarthmore College honors program.

To provide an examples of an honors program other than that of Swarthmore College and to demonstrate the diversity of honors programs at different institutions and institution types, it is time to turn to a study of another storied and oft studied honors program, that of the University

of Colorado. While this university was not mentioned in either Aydelotte's 1924 or 1925 study of honors programs, it developed significantly between World War I and World War II. Additionally, it is an example of the growth of honors programs in a large state university. This was quite a development and departure from the origins of honors at private institutions like Swarthmore, Harvard and Columbia. But in much the same way as Swarthmore College's honors program, the honors program at University of Colorado was mainly departmental.

At the University of Colorado, one finds another founding father of honors in American higher education, Joseph Cohen. Cohen arrived at University of Colorado in the mid-1920s as a professor. Once there he became dissatisfied with the awarding of honors at graduation based on grade point averages. He was frustrated with problems of the state university, such as hardened routine, largeness and hesitant and frugal state government, which made innovation difficult. In his philosophy of education, Cohen believed that knowledge was not something that was imparted and "that honors could not be properly conceived merely as harder 'work'" (1966, ix). In 1928 Cohen was appointed to a committee whose task it was to think of a better basis for honors than high grade point average at graduation. Cohen and the committee studied Aydelotte's 1925 chronicle of honors in American higher education. The committee decided to put forth a plan that would consist of honors in both general and departmental studies, which was approved by faculty in 1930 (Cohen 1966, foreword and 21).

Cohen and the University of Colorado became major features in the landscape of honors in American higher education because of what happened next. In the mid-1950s, the University of Colorado received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation that was intended to support the honors program in the College of Arts and Sciences and also to communicate and work with other colleges and universities regarding how to deal with the gifted student (Cohen 1966, 25;

Cohen 1956). The funding also provided for a conference on honors in American higher education to be held at the University of Colorado in June of 1957. The steering committee for this conference, whose members were mainly from large state universities, then went on to establish the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS). This committee was to serve as a central agency for honors programs, a clearinghouse for information on honors programs as supported by the conference and committee. ICSS also published a monthly journal called The Superior Student throughout its existence, from 1957-1965. Cohen was the leader of the ICSS and its offices were housed at the University of Colorado. During the years of the ICSS, Cohen traveled the country encouraging institutions; mainly state universities but then also private liberal arts college, professional schools, teachers college and junior colleges, to establish honors programs or to retrofit them in the design of the ICSS (Cohen 1966). Cohen was even thought of as the Johnny Appleseed of honors programs (“A New Era for Honors Programs”). Between 1957 and 1965, the number of honors programs in American higher education tripled (Cohen 1966, xii). The influence of Cohen and the ICSS was enormous and a major high note in the history of honors in American higher education.

While major developments in honors education were happening around the country, was Michigan State University witnessing similar or different patterns of honors development?

Honors at Michigan State University

With knowledge of the history of honors in American higher education, it is helpful and interesting to take up the case of a particular university’s experience with honors. Michigan State University is an important and interesting case in the landscape of honors in American higher education. In many ways, Michigan State University’s experiences with honors are emblematic of the experiences of many large state universities. In other ways, Michigan State University had

a unique approach to honors. This section of the study will examine those shared and disparate pieces of honors history and illuminate the pioneering nature of the Michigan State University Honors College.

It must be clear at the start of this investigation that this study is mainly based on primary documents. These primary documents include letters, meeting notes, meeting reports and press releases. These sources are often incomplete. Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections has much information, but not complete documentation. No major and complete documentation of the history of honors at Michigan State University exists. This study strives to be a part of such documentation.

A policy compilation file on honors, put together by the Office of the Provost and available from Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections provides much of the known history of honors at Michigan State University. Entries come from faculty meetings, the Administrative Group, the Board of Trustees and the Academic Council. All entries in this folder come under the heading of "Honors". The entries start in 1870 and continue through 1949. The first entry comes from a November 14, 1870 faculty meeting and states "It was resolved that all class honors on public occasions shall be within the entire control of the faculty" (Honors Policy Compilation). This first entry is both very important and very unclear. It is not readily apparent what is meant by "all class honors". What is clear is that honors, whatever it meant at the time, was entirely under the purveyance of the faculty. This falls in line with national trends in the late 19th century. At that time, faculties were the major controllers of academic governance at universities. The next entry in the folder does not come until May 3, 1915 and concerns faculty admonishment of social functions of honorary organizations. This entry is interesting, troubling and unclear. Were there no developments in honors from 1870 to 1915? This is

doubtful, but no other mention of honors has been found. The entry is interesting because it reveals the existence of honors organizations. The third entry is from the Administrative Group and came on June 1, 1925. This entry states that a committee recommended that students with a B average be recognized at commencement through the paper programs (Honors Policy Compilation). This is the first mention of many regarding the recognition of honors or high achievement using grades as a marker. From the discussion of honors in American higher education, it is clear that Michigan State University honors recognition policy was in line with the policies of many other colleges and universities.

The first concrete mention of treating honor students differently than other students in their academic plans comes on October 5, 1925 from the Administrative Group. “Dean Bissell brought up the matter of recognition of honor students during their course with the idea of permitting them to select their course of study in the senior year. It was suggested that the matter first be submitted to his division faculty for consideration and definite plan” (Honors Policy Compilation). Bissell’s proposal would have been innovative and an antecedent for the Michigan State University Honors College in philosophy but the proposal does not seem to be acted on.

Michigan State University saw similar growth and development in honors education in the 1920s as was seen by the rest of the American higher education. The 1920s also marks the first mention of honors education in any publication about Michigan State University. Paul L. Dressel’s College to University: The Hannah Years at Michigan State, 1935-1969, provides a chapter on the Honors College. Dressel comments on the 1920s as the time when discussion of various proposals and forms of honors first took place. He contends that the instigation for such discussion was “the increasing enrollments and the appearances of majors in the sciences and arts in the mid 1920s” (139). He goes onto explain “departmental honors programs existed in

several departments by the late 1920s and early 1930s” (139). The fact that Michigan State University instituted departmental honors programs and there is no specific mention in the honors policy compilation folder is cause for caution. Clearly this folder does not contain a complete record of honors at Michigan State University. Nonetheless, this development of departmental honors programs was very much in line with what was happening with honors education around the country. Additionally, there was much more discussion of honors education in the Administrative Group and faculty meetings in the late 1920s. As was happening in the rest of the country, honors became a hot-button issue. Furthermore, an experiment was carried out in the spring and fall terms of 1928. This experiment allowed juniors and seniors who had twice as many points as credits and no grade below a C to have the option of not attending classes. All students were still responsible to complete all assigned work, but class attendance was not mandatory. From the Faculty Meeting on March 23, 1928, it is clear that this idea had been tried at a few institutions and had been considered a success. In fall of 1929, the faculty decided to make the experiment a permanent opportunity for high achieving students (Honors Policy Compilation). Another apparent problem with the honors policy compilation is that there is never mention of an end to this policy. Since this policy is no longer in effect, it is clear that the policy compilation is not complete.

While the honors policy compilation marks the 1930s and 1940s as a simple continuation of recognizing honors societies and using high grades as the marker for honors, Dressel contends “the idea of an Honors College had been discussed by 1940, and had it not been for the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Hannah very likely would have launched or at least proposed an Honors College in 1942 or 1943” (140). Another seeming incongruence is Dressel’s statement that the policy of credit by examination available in the Basic College began in 1910 (140). The

first record of this major development in the honors policy compilation came in 1953 (Honors Policy Compilation). Additionally, the Dean of the Basic College stated that a policy of credit by examination had been in place since 1944 (Hamilton 1955). In any of these cases, the policy of credit by examination was a major step in recognizing students of high capability. A final precursor to the founding of the Honors College is the honors course or honors section. In March of 1954, the Administrative Group noted that Dean Hamilton, then of the Basic College, allowed one section of Introduction to Poetry to be set aside for Basic College students with a 3.5 or better average (Honors Policy Compilation).

The appointment of Thomas H. Hamilton as Dean of the Basic College in March of 1954 was a decisive and influential event for the shaping of honors at Michigan State University. Hamilton had received his Ph.D. from University of Chicago and had gone onto Carleton College and Chatham College before Michigan State University (Idzerda). Hamilton had an interest in the problem of the superior student. The first mention of Hamilton's interest in this matter came in a paper he wrote for the Basic College Newsletter in November 1953 titled "A Note on the Problem of Heterogeneity". In this paper, Hamilton, then Assistant to the Dean of the Basic College, wrote "an important step will have been taken when there is simple recognition that is as important to expend out resources on the very able as it is to use them on the average or least able" (1953, 6). The context for Hamilton's comment was the enormous growth (an increase by over one thousand per cent) seen by higher education, and state universities in particular, from 1900 to 1950 (Hamilton 1953, 1). In this paper, Hamilton goes onto suggest that more intense academic counseling may be part of an honors program. This intense advising would become a hallmark and distinguishing feature of Michigan State University's pioneering Honors College. Furthermore, as Hamilton described in a 1959 letter to

Stanley Idzerda, founding Director of the Honors College, the problem of the superior student “was one of the first matters to which attention was given” at the time of his appointment (1959). “There were frequent discussions with department heads as to what might be done for the superior student within the Basic College. There was no possibility of reaching agreement with the department heads on any single system, and it was finally decided that some experimentation in each department would be encouraged” (Hamilton 1959). This was the auspicious start to the pioneering developments in honors education that were to emerge from Michigan State University in the next few years.

In the fall of 1954, a university wide group met to discuss the issue of the superior student. This group was brought together because of a conversation regarding the matter between Hamilton and Don Grummon (Counseling Center Associate Professor). Other people in the group included, but were not limited to, Muelder (Dean of the College of Science and Arts), Osgood (Division of Mathematical and Physical Science Director and Dean of the Graduate School), Dressel (Counseling Center Director), Ross (Counseling Center Instructor) and Winburne (Assistant to the Dean in the Basic College). The group had no official status and met three or four times. Hamilton recalled no official action taken by this group but believed two important developments emerged. First, the group requested that the Counseling Center interview a number of superior students. Hamilton stated that “it was the reports of these interviews which led me to the conclusion that you couldn’t deal satisfactorily with these students in a program uniform for all the diversity of personality types included in this high ability group was astounding” (1955). This observance of the diversity of high achieving students led Hamilton to believe that no one program with set requirements for every student could work. This belief led to the lack of hard and fast requirements in the Honors College,

another distinguishing feature. Second, Hamilton started to believe that Michigan State University “should institutionalize indifference toward [the superior student] as far as formal requirements are concerned” (1959). Additionally, Hamilton recalled that he wrote a memorandum and then a proposal to this effect and circulated it to the group and many department and division heads. At that time, the spring of 1955, and until February of 1956, no further action was taken. People discussed the proposal but nothing happened. Hamilton said “I felt that as Dean of the Basic College, I had gone about as far as I could, for as you know the Basic College is always subject to a great deal of criticism when it proposes any kind of institution-wide program” (1959). This was the first mention that Hamilton’s proposal included the idea that an honors program be university-wide. The all-encompassing nature of the Honors College that was to emerge from this proposal was its most striking and pioneering feature.

The next important step in the development of the Honors College was Hamilton’s appointment as Academic Vice President in 1955. Shortly after his appointment, Hamilton approached Michigan State University President John Hannah with his ideas on honors education. Hamilton believed that no one had approached Hannah before that time because they thought that Hannah would find their ideas on honors education contrary to the principles on which Michigan State University was founded. Instead, Hamilton found Hannah to be enthusiastic and wanting Hamilton to present the ideas to the State Board, which Hamilton did in early 1956. Michigan State University had been founded to give higher education access to those who were not being served by existing institutions of higher education—to provide greater access. Somehow, the idea of an Honors College was thought to seem elitist. From Aydelotte’s thoughts on the matter, it is clear that a truly democratic system of education provides each student with challenge appropriate for his or her ability. Thus, with Hannah’s stamp of approval,

the State Board accepted the idea for Michigan State University's pioneering Honors College even before it had gone before the faculty governance system (Hamilton 1959). In February 1956, Hamilton introduced the idea for an Honors College as the Academic Council and was met with warm reviews. For details of the Honors College at its founding, see the addendum "A Proposal Dealing with Superior Students".

Once again, Dressel's record of the founding of the Honors College differs somewhat dramatically from Hamilton's letters. Dressel states, "in 1957 Hannah and Vice President Hamilton joined in naming a committee to formulate ideas for an honors college. At that time, an honors college was viewed solely as a vehicle to attract outstanding students in sufficient quantity to create a new image for the university. Neither the science and arts faculty committee nor the Basic College faculty saw it as a means for accelerating enrolled students" (140). Dressel is incorrect regarding the date of a planning committee as the State Board of Agriculture approved the Honors College on November 9, 1956 (Hamilton 1959). Additionally, all of Hamilton's letters contradict Dressel's proposed founding principles of the Honors College. At this point, no clear conclusion can be drawn. Continued exploration of materials available at University Archives and Historical Collections is necessary as are documents that no longer exist, making this matter somewhat irresolvable.

What is most important in this discussion is that the Honors College was founded and looked upon as model of honors education around the country. "The College has been the subject in at least 100 Michigan newspapers, and has received attention in prominent national media" (Idezerda). Stanley Idezerda, the first director of the Honors College added, "I know of no other university with a comparable program" (1957). In 1963, Idzerda "At least 100 inquiries per year

come from other colleges and universities concerning Michigan State University's unique Honors College program" (Press Release).

Michigan State University decided to stick with its founding mission of education for all when it realized there were students of many different ability levels and served all those populations. The story of the founding of one of the most unique and pioneering honors programs in the country would not have been possible without the historical foundations of Aydelotte at Swarthmore College and would not have meant as much without the spread of honors programs achieved by Cohen and the University of Colorado. While honors programs had their start in private colleges, the public institution of Michigan State University took the concept to another level, one that continues today in the 50th year of the Honors College.

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