

## A Defiant Honors Response to Regime Change

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**Abstract:** Having experienced the harmful effects of a college regime change and the reductive bottom-line mandates that threaten honors education, the author takes a resolutely subversive stance, advocating for strong resistance against administrative efforts that compromise the dedication of an honors program or college to academic excellence. The essay offers a brief review of literature about how to manage organizational change effectively, arguing that when a regime change ignores such best-practice leadership processes and forces agendas that jeopardize the success of honors, firm and coordinated active pushback is the appropriate response. The author shares specific strategies that can help honors resist the negative impacts of toxic regime change.

**Keywords:** higher education leadership changes; professional transitions; program elimination; resisting administrative threats; Columbia College (SC)—Dr. John Zubizarreta Honors Program

I carry from my mother's womb / A fanatic heart.

—William Butler Yeats

Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine.

—Henry David Thoreau

Honors directors and deans: rise up! I do not claim to speak out with the artful gravity of a Yeats or Thoreau, and I shamefully plead guilty to quoting them out of context, but the time has long come for us to take a lead role either in celebrating and supporting enlightened, progressive, enabling administrative regimes or in doing everything we can to bring down

obtuse, narrowminded, destructive ones. Perhaps I, myself, am guilty of reductive thinking. In recent years, as my college's senior faculty member, I was embroiled in a bitter struggle to advocate for not only honors but almost all the humanities and liberal arts during the reign of a cost-cutting, personnel-reducing, ROI-obsessed temporary administration. In the fray, I sometimes heard colleagues say that I was only exacerbating the painful situation with adversarial language and behavior. Maybe there was some truth to the cautionary advice. I know I sounded cranky at times.

But time ultimately was on my side, and I have no regrets about my resistance or the subversive attitudes of some of my colleagues whose programs and careers were wrecked or, worse, completely ended. I have always prided myself on being a community builder, a peacemaker, an empathic teacher and leader, but I have a story to tell, a fighting stance to endorse, and I invite any of you to offer alternative viewpoints on how to handle regime changes and so-called institutional "revisionings" (often code for extensive cuts) that can admittedly sometimes be welcome, positive, and invigorating (as I concede later) while other times they can be hurtful and catastrophic. Either way, the question is how we—as honors faculty, staff, directors, or deans—deal with vexing changes that affect our positions, careers, programs or colleges, and personal lives.

I should point out here that, as William Bridges suggests, change is something that happens externally while transition is the inner process that helps us prepare for outer change (*Managing Transitions* 3). What provoked me to write about regime change in honors is that in my thirty-plus years in the field, in addition to my own recent skirmish, I have witnessed too many colleagues and programs or colleges experiencing the shattering effects of administrative agendas for change without respect for the critical reflection, reason, patience, and humanity

necessary in navigating delicate personal transitions. Such agendas often disregard fundamental principles of “build[ing] trust and understanding, and giv[ing] people the tools they need to move forward through a difficult time” (William Bridges Associates). We have lost many a bright, productive, fond honors director or dean because of dysfunctional regime change; when such circumstances warrant action, it’s time for counter-friction.

Let me begin my story with the happy ending. Resistance, it turns out, won the day in my tale. Once the relatively short, oppressive reign of a misguided interim administration concluded in a sudden departure, the college began a process of healing and rebuilding. Honors was one of the few academic areas still standing intact even though courses, funding, enrollment, student opportunities, faculty involvement, and alumnae support were sorely diminished. However, because of the program’s longstanding local, national, and international reputation and the respect it had earned among faculty, students, previous administrations, and peer institutions, it survived the most ravaging cuts we saw across campus. Also, I and other trusty allies of honors on campus voiced our resistance during the dark time, ultimately making total elimination of the program a difficult and unwise move. I remember reaching out to students (who wield more power than they imagine), fellow faculty, outside colleagues, whatever few appreciative administrators remained after consultant-led dismissals, and even choice trustees to build a rising tide of support. Eventually, the college launched a remarkably successful fundraising pledge and naming campaign that has revitalized honors today with the help of loyal alumnae and friends.

Honors is back. The recovery, however, taught me many lessons about how vulnerable honors programs, colleges, faculty, staff, and administrators are to the unpredictable effects of the often devastating kinds of external changes and emotional internal transitions we may experience. Our fates sometimes are not in our own hands. We had better be prepared.

Not all changes, of course, are the same as toxic changes mandated at upper-administrative levels. Some—such as a decision by a director or dean to leave the position voluntarily to return to full-time teaching and research in one’s home department, a funding windfall from an unexpected donor gift, a move up from director to dean when a program becomes a college, a new job opportunity elsewhere, or time for retirement—are benign and can happen in natural ways in the course of an honors career or in the life of a program or college. One rare instance in the body of honors scholarship is described by Craig Cobane in a *JNCHC* essay in which he recalls the benefits to honors of a regime change that involved a new president who made honors an institutional priority. In such cases, the wise approach is to have made sure all along that the program or college is in good shape, able to move forward even stronger no matter the structural, financial, or personnel changes. You can find some possible scenarios of harmless or even happy changes with suggested responses in a “Brief Ideas” essay that several colleagues and I published in the 2022 volume of *Honors in Practice* (Bhavsar et al.). We list useful tips in cases such as moving from a narrow academic discipline to the freeing, experimental, flexible, and interdisciplinary domain of honors education; becoming a new director or dean; or retiring from honors leadership. These are outer changes as well as inner transitions that are often exciting and rewarding.

What happens, though, when changes occur in the form of institutional regime shuffles that threaten the honors program or college, its faculty, its leaders, and its students? Proper preparation—the same strategy that can help honors strengthen and grow during positive personal, programmatic, or institutional shifts—is even more crucial when confronted with disruptive forms of change. Rather than the usual sources I turn to for inspiration on teaching, learning, and leadership issues, I consulted the literature about managing change (as opposed to

the more emotionally charged quandary of *how to respond* to change). These resources are plentiful, and consensus suggests that taking steps to make sure one's home is in order before changes occur builds essential sustainability and safeguards against adverse administrative decrees. For example, Jeffrey Bradfield and Cole Clark's "Seven Principles for Effective Change Management" stresses the importance of vision, alignment, communication, and creating win-win processes and outcomes, among other insights, as ways to ensure successful responses to regime change in higher education. The Change Leader consulting group advocates for establishing a shared vision, forging partnerships, building trust, ensuring appropriate resources to support change, and other avenues for successful transitions leading to change, especially in challenging times. William Bridges offers a number of strategic practices for "making the most of change," echoing the trend of emphasizing thoughtful preparation in managing change; he says, "Changes of any sort—even though they may be justified in economic or technological terms—finally succeed or fail on the basis of whether the people affected do things differently," affirming that the key to building a responsive team and making change work without personal or organizational disaster is to "help people through" impending transitions in their sense of stability, future prosperity, and happiness (5-6). Similarly, Deanna deBara, writing for the Lattice team-building group, urges preparation for organizational changes by preemptively creating a climate of opportunities for discussion, transparency, and involvement. Joseph A. Custer, writing about adapting to administrative changes in the context of tensions caused by leadership adjustments in a law library, focuses on preparations that he calls the "'phases' approach to managing change," a template he borrows from Bridges (72). The phases are methodically sequenced to promise a satisfactory response, reinforcing again that doing whatever we can to anticipate the deleterious decisions of an unfriendly regime is a worthwhile investment.

The frame of Custer's experience and directives is that the tense administrative adjustments he describes were based on good intentions; the changes proposed by a new leader were at first disorienting, resulting in some oft-cited responses to change (confusion, anxiety, disenchantment, anger, denial, resistance), but in the end those affected by regime change accepted the shifts as reasonable and continued to work on closure and commitment. I wonder, however, if the scenario were different—if the regime change was destructive to people's careers and well-being, to relationships, programs, and history—what then? Perhaps that is when resistance is the way forward, despite being frequently maligned as a character flaw or inability to change by those pushing for change. As John McNay declares,

One of the truly frustrating things about working for reforms in higher education is to get our college and university administrators to put education first and not allow the resources of the institutions to get hijacked for other purposes. The inability to focus on the real problems is widespread and yet the solutions are right there before everyone's eyes. They only require the courage to address them.

When honors is threatened with hijack by a regime more interested in the bottom line than in the core value of creating an academic culture in which students and faculty can flourish, it's time for courage.

Now, I know what you're thinking. There must be other ways. And I suppose surely there are. For instance, in a post on the website of the career management firm The Muse, Eliza Berman recommends surviving management change by "wielding the power of foresight," "networking early," listening appreciatively and critically, reevaluating one's work, "striking a balance" between holding on to "unshakeable" former ideas and embracing the directions of a new regime, and remaining open to "challeng[ing] our assumptions." Isabel Thottam agrees: "To

most people, change is viewed as a burden and is not always welcomed, especially when rushed or poorly handled. This is why 70% of change initiatives are doomed to fail”; consequently, she advises a process of four careful steps that mirror much of what we have already described.

Taking a slow and thoughtful approach to responding to regime change is another possible solution, one that gets some press when dealing with the all-too-common vagaries involving presidents and other top administrators and their sometimes hasty push for changes: “Faculty in particular don’t like when big changes happen too fast. The most successful way to manage turnover in faculty members’ eyes is doing it slowly” (Harrington). Patience, however, can be difficult in scenarios where regime change originates from swift-striking “hired guns” brought in to “clean house.” As Rebecca Harrington warns in quoting a University of Minnesota official, “The most dangerous person is the one who comes in from outside and does not take enough time to get the lay of the land and just starts trying to impose his or her will on a potentially intractable system.” Pat Sanaghan repeats the admonition: “Over the past five years, I have witnessed a troubling trend emerging: too often the new president comes in and begins to disassemble the current senior team and bring in their own people. That is rarely a good idea and can severely damage the institution and create unnecessary turmoil.” This warning eerily captures exactly what happened at my institution. Going slow, inviting reflection, honoring history and traditions, celebrating existing strengths, relying on seasoned and dedicated faculty and staff, listening to students, respecting faculty governance—all dead ends. In such a draining situation, the reason honors survived was the program’s undeniable, documented worth to the institution and our fierce pushback.

To be fair, just as there are other ways to respond to change, there are certainly other reasons for change, especially in higher education, a domain where change is often difficult due

to structural, financial, leadership-related, and other challenges endemic to academia. Colleges and universities, for example, normally have complex governance systems that perhaps involve boards of trustees, chancellors, presidents, provosts, deans, chairs, faculty, and sometimes external community, corporate, or church constituents—not the lean, efficient organizational structure needed for quick, necessary changes. Also, academic institutions, despite the cliché of the ivory tower, do not exist apart from the uncontrolled political, social, economic, and other forces around them that often require significant, swift adaptations to pressures of the “real” world. Undoubtedly, colleges and universities do call for periodic if not immediate changes in curriculum; operational policies; administrative, faculty, and staff personnel; missions and strategic plans; campus facilities; and other areas. Leaders with system-wide perspective sometimes need to take the helm and lead with vision and confidence since many faculty may be expert teachers and scholars in their respective fields but typically have not been trained to manage multi-dimensional institutional change.

However, even when changes are in the best interest of an institution, the players in charge and their methods may not be. Again, we had better be prepared and courageous. Thus, in the case of dealing with a regime change that threatens to dismantle honors—your program, your career, your calling!—I say *resist*. The form of resistance may involve a variety of actions, but as Richard Badenhausen declares in his 2019 NCHC presidential address, honors professionals already occupy “overtly transgressive, and often progressive” spaces (6), and we have practice at being “academic and pedagogical troublemakers. . . . We don’t fit; we disrupt; we make those around us uneasy, all in the service of student learning” (5). Here are several disruptive ideas:

1. Have ample, compelling, evidence-based accounts of achievements, contributions, and successes of the program or college and its affiliated faculty, students, and alumnae as well as a strong honors leadership portfolio of your own.
2. Provide documentation of how honors is an asset to the institution in recruitment, admissions, retention, graduation rates, scholarship and fellowship awards, and alumnae giving.
3. As recommended in NCHC's "Shared Principles and Practices," supply evidence of how honors "aligns itself with the mission of the institution" and responds as a partner to the institution's "strategic plan and core values" (1).
4. Mentor and empower an assistant director or dean with the necessary knowledge and experience to sustain honors in the case of either a forced or voluntary leadership change. Don't be caught unaware and vulnerable by sudden regime change. Have a succession plan in place for honors leadership and contingency plans for responding to edicts that compromise the excellence of a program or college.
5. Enlist the help of current and former students in strongly voicing support for honors (protest rallies, school newspaper, honors newsletter, letter writing campaign).
6. Marshal the collective voice of a fully institutionalized honors committee of faculty, staff, and students. Use faculty governance to advantage.
7. Make sure that honors is part of the institution's regular program and college assessment, curriculum review, and faculty development and evaluation agendas, keeping it from being an isolated and vulnerable entity.

8. Seek external support from any community, civic, and corporate liaisons that have been friends of honors. An external, community-based advisory council can be a valuable support group.
9. Identify sympathetic current and former chief administrators (trustees, presidents, provosts, deans, chairs) and ask for testimonial letters.
10. Write protest letters to local media. Raise public awareness and support.
11. Ask for help from state, regional, national, and international honors professional organizations. NCHC's powerful proclamations of "Shared Principles and Practices" and "Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory and Practice of Inclusion" can be effective tools in countering regime change arguments that oppose honors as elitist or unnecessary.
12. Find subversive ways to sustain honors credits and maintain a robust program of study when cuts to curriculum and faculty threaten the program or college (double-listed courses, honors contracts, credit equivalents, qualified adjuncts, shared faculty/staff positions, student-led credit-bearing activities). Don't allow reductive business-model thinking to decimate honors by shrinking its resources and demoralizing faculty and students.
13. Turn a regime's ROI mentality back on itself by pointing to detailed outcomes that demonstrate honors as an invaluable return on investment for the institution through increased matriculation of high-achieving students; superior retention rates; potential for enhanced alumnae giving, donor support, and naming gifts; improved chances for significant grants, fellowships, scholarships, and awards; or boosting of institutional rankings (if that matters).

14. Speak up on the record in faculty meetings to challenge and reject short-sighted attempts to gut honors; stand up proudly and vigorously to defend honors. Remember the call for courage: a risky proposition, to be sure, especially when one's position is at stake. Hence, assemble a recognized senior group to join you and to speak collectively with the power of professional experience, contractual tenure, and distinguished reputation.

So here we are. The department chair, who never quite relished your position in honors, wants you out of honors, back full time. A hired "efficiency expert" consultant convinces the provost to eliminate honors. A new president decides honors needs new blood and a sweeping makeover. An uninformed but zealous interim leader supplied by The Registry (the self-proclaimed "Gold Standard in interim placements") declares that honors is elitist, too expensive, and inconsistent with a new brand. Retirement looms near, and upper administration insinuates that it's time to go. Such scenarios are not as far-fetched as you might think, given today's educational climate: wholesale budget cuts and shrinking faculty lines; unstable institutional futures; feverish shifts in marketing and searches for new niches, trendy initiatives, and boutique programs; attacks on liberal education, academic freedom, elective credits, and faculty tenure; reductive transactional leadership mentalities; and proliferation of consultant- and interim-led "revisioning" of curricula, programs, budgeting priorities, even institutional identity. Facing such disorienting pressures and upheaval seems more than just likely: it seems, perhaps, inevitable. How do you cope? Fight or flight or something in between? I know what I did.

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