

## HONORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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### **Book Review:**

Wolfensberger, Marca V.C. (2015). *Talent Development in European Higher Education: Honors Programs in the Benelux, Nordic and German-Speaking Countries*. Cham, Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, London: Springer. 335 pages. Print (ISBN: 978-3-319-12918-1, USD \$24.99) and online (ISBN: 978-3-319-12919-8).

Reviewed by Amber Zoe Smith, Virginia Tech University.

*Talent Development in European Higher Education* is a first comprehensive survey of honors programs in northern Europe. Commissioned by the Dutch Sirius Program, this book defines honors education, identifies honors programs in 11 countries, and describes the programs and the cultural climates that led to their formation (or lack thereof). Dr. Marca Wolfensberger is a respected Dutch professor and researcher who adds this book to her already substantial contributions to honors education in Europe.

Globalization has arrived at higher education institutions, and many European countries have responded with interest in better understanding their neighbors' practices and in helping their students become more internationally competitive. This book directly addresses both of those needs by cataloging all current honors programs in northern European countries and by placing them generally within their cultural contexts.

To focus her exploratory mission, Wolfensberger begins by defining honors as programming with selective admission criteria that challenges motivated and talented students to excel and accomplish specific goals (12). These programs can be disciplinary, interdisciplinary, or multidisciplinary, and they commonly exist at both the bachelor and master degree levels. Program content ranges from coursework to collaborative local problem solving, and the emphasis is often influenced by cultural attitudes toward excellence.

Wolfensberger finds that despite recent interest in enhanced education, many European nations are inhibited by cultural egalitarianism. Traditionally, talent and ability have been seen as divisive qualities akin to religion or ethnicity that could be detrimentally used to imply that some people have more inherent worth than others. While Europeans believe in supplementing the education of the weakest students, many stop short of ensuring that talented students are sufficiently challenged, believing that strong minds will find ways to advance themselves. All

countries investigated in this book struggle against this potential for discrimination. The Nordic countries of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland display the highest levels of egalitarianism, which is defined here as equality of educational outcome. Other countries, such as the Netherlands and Germany, focus more on equality of opportunity to comprehensive education for students of all levels.

Nevertheless, honors programs have been established at 72 European higher education institutions, most within the last decade. Half of them are located in the Netherlands; a quarter are in Germany; and the rest are divided among Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and Austria (242). No programs were found in Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, or Switzerland. For each program, Wolfensberger describes its general structure and provides quantitative data that is also organized in charts, tables, and maps. She reminds readers that a lack of honors programs—that meet her definition—does not necessarily indicate a lack of provision for talented or motivated students. All countries support differentiation for outstanding athletes and artists, for example, and many do so for general academics at the primary or secondary school levels. Wolfensberger calls her findings a foundation for future research.

Indeed, the book's greatest strength is its potential to catalyze future studies. The information is both staggering in volume and meticulous in detail. From her research process to the people she interviewed, Wolfensberger has been transparent. The most expansive information is appropriately about the honors programs themselves: enrollment numbers, students served, type of program and higher education institution, and links to website and contact information. She also describes the local primary and secondary school systems for context. Structurally, she has organized every country's data in the same format: education system, local culture and political policy toward excellence, recent developments, and finally the

program-by-program report. This consistent structure makes reference and inter-country comparison easy.

Given the colossal scope of this project—to identify and describe all honors programs in northern Europe—one expects some minor weaknesses. The sections about “culture and policy towards excellence” seem heavily weighted toward politics, perhaps viewing law as documentation of culture. This emphasis makes the summation of non-political culture feel comparatively thin. That said, many chapters do include short quotations and descriptions of specific honors program initiatives. In addition to injecting a welcome human presence, these real-world examples also help readers better compare the northern European programs to their own. In terms of readability, the information is dense, and there are occasional vague transitions and moments of awkwardness in translation and editing. However, these imperfections do not diminish the significance of Wolfensberger’s achievement.

Overall, this book decisively accomplishes its mission of creating the first inventory of northern European honors programs. Higher education institutions, politicians, and educators from the 11 countries in this study can immediately benefit from viewing their situation in a regional context. International honors educators and administrators can better understand and contextualize their work with this global perspective. Perhaps best of all, this report benefits researchers. Wolfensberger has modeled a clear, replicable process, and she has laid the foundation for critical studies about overall goals, efficacy, and impacts of honors programs. Given the cultural barriers that she describes, it seems that future studies will have to investigate the personal and communal effects of honors to allay fears of discrimination if honors is to gain traction in egalitarian cultures. To interested researchers: hurry. Or Wolfensberger might beat you to it.

### References

Wolfensberger, Marca V.C. *Talent Development in European Higher Education: Honors Programs in the Benelux, Nordic and German-Speaking Countries*. Cham, Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, London: Springer Open, 2015. Print.

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