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Opening Doors to Engage a More Diverse Population in Honors: A Conversation

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Abstract: In this article, a student, faculty member, and staff member address the question of how to engage underrepresented student populations in honors programs. A student of color describes how an honors course with experiential learning components captivated and motivated her, significantly altering her definition of self. The faculty and staff member acknowledge the necessary changes to large-scale policies, such as refining admissions criteria and implementing more diverse programs, in order to engage students of color in honors education. Key suggestions include cross-listing courses to engage current and prospective honors students, teaching honors courses and facilitating honors experiences that emphasize aspects of social (in)justice, and incorporating a holistic admissions process for both new and current university students. Identifying ways to engage

diverse student populations in predominantly white programs is vital to both the success of all students and to honors education as a whole.

Key Words: partnerships, underrepresented, equity, experiential, identity

INTRODUCTION

“Smart but definitely not one of those smart kids—the kids whose parents were members of the booster club and themselves members of the high school’s national honors society.” This is how Quentina Dunbar recalls her high school self. During her sophomore year of college, Quentina joined the honors program at Minnesota State University, Mankato. As a regional comprehensive public university, the institution has a history of increasing access to higher education. Minnesota State Mankato is a predominately white institution where the honors program does not historically attract a diverse body of students. The honors program attempts to extend the institution’s vision of access by engaging diversity and, in particular, by reaching out to domestic students of color

Ginny Walters, the program’s assistant director, and Jill Cooley, a history professor who often works with honors, recognize the challenges of attracting students like Quentina—students who belong in honors but haven’t seen themselves that way. In her lead article “Thinking Critically, Acting Justly” for the *JNCHC* “Forum on Honors and Social Justice,” Naomi Yavneh Klos asked “how honors can be a place of access, equity, and excellence in higher education” (4). In this piece, we provide a few possible solutions that we hope other honors administrators will find useful to increase the underrepresented student population in their programs. First, programs can make space in their courses and co-curricular programming for highly motivated students who are not currently enrolled in the honors program, particularly those from traditionally underrepresented communities. Second, these honors courses and experiences can emphasize the study of social (in)justice. Offering such curricular and co-curricular activities to highly motivated non-honors students, especially those from diverse backgrounds, brings issues of social justice to the awareness of more privileged students and attracts a more diverse population of students to honors by engaging them in conversations that are meaningful, important, and influential in their lives. Third, programs can use

a holistic admissions process to admit both new and current students that allows students who express potential for development but who have not previously identified themselves as honors students.

A conversation between such a student and an administrator and teacher in honors can help illustrate and illuminate strategies of inclusion that have been deployed at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and that might be successful in other honors programs and colleges as well.

CONVERSATION

Quentina

Academically, I would consider myself a late bloomer, not by capabilities for I have always been an intellectually inclined student, but in ownership of this inclination. In high school, I took exclusively honors and advanced placement classes yet looked to my classmates in our school's magnet STEM program as the high achievers. I just liked the challenge. More than anything else I enjoyed the in-depth discussions and the business of thinking for the sake of contemplation. English was always my favorite subject. I did well in my classes but nothing spectacular. I was not a part of any study or test prep groups. Socially, my classmates and I had mostly different circles of friends. Like most, if not all, of my peers, by senior year I had one foot out the door with my sights set on new challenges, bigger and better.

The first semester of my undergraduate career was marked by high achievement and a thirst for purpose. After my first six months in college, my grade point average was higher than it had been in high school. I started my freshman year undecided and was determined, perhaps even desperate, to declare a major. Being the first in my immediate family to attend and eventually finish at a four-year university was not something I took lightly. Social justice was a feeling without a name until my introduction to a Gender and Women's Studies course during spring semester. Learning about social justice was like tasting a familiar ingredient in a new dish.

The field of gender and women's studies validated my enjoyment of discussion, storytelling, theorizing, and understanding in a way I had never experienced in or outside the classroom. I went from thirsty to hungry. I needed to fill my belly deep with everything I could. I took courses across disciplines seeking knowledge. I was grasping for knowledge of self. The relevance and opportunity for introspection provided by social justice education propelled me even further onto a path of high achievement. I could finally see

myself in my education. Through my social justice education, I became more active on campus and in the community at large.

Ginny

Increasing access to honors for students who have not traditionally seen themselves as “honors students” starts with a more inclusive admissions process. Since 2009, the honors program at Minnesota State Mankato has employed holistic admission. Applicants to honors programs—whether incoming first-year students, current Minnesota State Mankato students, or transfer students—are evaluated with a holistic rubric that takes into account their potential for growth and achievement as well as any previous successes. Qualitative evaluations of achievement—such as student narratives and recommendation forms—carry more weight than numeric data. An important component of our efforts toward inclusivity is accepting current students after their first semester as well as transfer students; we do a round of applications for current students each fall and spring semester. Quentina entered the program via this route as do approximately one-third of our students. This group of students tends to be more diverse in terms of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender.

Jill

Current students may need contact with honors pedagogy to encourage them to apply. Cross-listing courses with other departments can facilitate this contact. Three years ago, I taught a study-away course called “Anne Moody’s Mississippi: Race, Culture, and Civil Rights,” which was cross-listed in honors and history. Six students registered for the class: four in the honors section and two as history students. The honors students typified the program as a whole. Although they came from different academic departments—including art, anthropology, education, and social work—they were, like their professor, all white. Opening the class to non-honors students could and in this case did mean expanding access to a more diverse student population as both non-honors students were women of color: Quentina was from a Liberian-American community near Minneapolis, and the other non-honors student, the only history major in the class, grew up in a Spanish-speaking household. I never thought of the class as being divided between honors and non-honors students. They all participated in the same learning activities, were assessed by the same rubrics, and pursued the same learning outcomes and honors competencies.

Quentina

My multidisciplinary courses led me to “Anne Moody’s Mississippi: Race, Class and Civil Rights,” a history class cross-listed with an honors seminar. In addition to analysis of the Civil Rights Movement through the lens of a woman, the course provided an experiential education component—a trip to Mississippi over spring break. The course offered an opportunity not only to mix my studies with travel for the first time but also to explore one of the many intersections of my identities. I spent much of my childhood grappling with what it meant to be African versus African American. Though my paternal grandmother was born and raised in Michigan, my father and all but one of his siblings were born in Liberia because of the turbulent racial climate of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. My mother was born and raised in Liberia and came to the United States as a refugee.

With this background and understanding, I enrolled in “Anne Moody’s Mississippi” seeking knowledge of self and of the history that altered my family’s story forever. The class was small: six students, our professor, and later the then-director of the honors program (Christopher Corley), who accompanied us on our trip. This intimate encounter with the “smart kids” became another transitional event in my academic career. Prior to this experience, the first word that would have come to my mind when confronted with an honors student would have been “different,” but through engagement with the course content, class discussions, and most importantly my classmates, I came to realize that I am and have always been one of those smart kids. We had similar grades. We were taking similar courses. We had similar interests. I started my honors program application somewhere in Mississippi.

Jill

Quentina’s experience with the course exemplifies another important point in Klos’s article: the significance of using honors curriculum to engage social justice. The course attracted Quentina and her classmates because it gave them an opportunity to examine our nation’s troubled civil rights history and to consider its modern implications. The book *Coming of Age in Mississippi: The Classic Autobiography of Growing Up Poor and Black in the Rural South*, by civil rights activist Anne Moody, led us to reflect on important questions such as “Who owns history? Who tells the story of civil rights and how do they tell it? What are the implications of past discrimination for communities of color today?”

Driving in a van from Minnesota to Mississippi, we explored the sites where civil rights history played out. In Memphis, we listened to blues, ate barbecue and Delta tamales, and visited the civil rights museum—on the site of the Lorraine Motel, where in April 1968 an assassin took the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the Mississippi Delta, a culturally rich but financially distressed area, we drove through fields where people of color historically labored to enrich wealthy white landowners. In Sumner, we visited the Emmett Till Interpretive Center, founded in memory of the murdered teenager and designed to seek racial reconciliation. Two memorials sit outside the Sumner courthouse where Till's murderers were tried and acquitted: one honors the town's Confederate soldiers, and one commemorates Till's short life and tragic death. In Jackson, the students visited the campuses of two historically black colleges: Jackson State University, where public funding limited the ability of 1960s-era student activists to protest inequality, and Tougaloo College, Moody's alma mater and a private institution that served as home base for Mississippi's civil rights movement.

As the students reflected on the trip, they expressed horror at the magnitude of past discrimination and alarm at the ways historical oppression continues to contribute to contemporary inequality. Social justice classes need to be taught across the university, and in honors they can attract more students like Quentina who seek to understand their positionalities within historical and contemporary hierarchies of power.

Ginny

As honors staff, we have known that there is a need to increase our program's equity and diversity. In the fall of 2016, Anne Dahlman, the honors program director at the time, initiated a student leadership group called Equity Ambassadors, consisting of honors students of color and serving as an advisory, support, and advocacy group. The honors program empowered the group to make bold programmatic recommendations targeting changes that could make the program a more inclusive, safe, and relevant learning environment for all students. As with any group, the efforts of this one involved a lot of trial and error. Some of the students' ideas were successful and became integral, for instance, to rewriting our application questions. Some of the students' ideas and efforts flopped—like the conversation circle coordinated for honors students of color that no one attended.

Through all the peaks and valleys of their first year, however, the students learned about efforts to increase equity and access within the program

and across the institution as a whole; as a result, their role and mission have evolved over the last couple of years. Their current mission statement, created at the beginning of the 2017–2018 academic year, is “to advocate for domestic students of color by enabling all students to provide encouragement and inspiration through community collaboration.” Notice that their mission statement does not specify *honors* domestic students of color. Their own experiences helped them to understand that any effort to increase equity and access would need to extend beyond the honors program.

Currently, two Equity Ambassadors are pursuing an undergraduate research project that seeks to identify the types of social and academic experiences domestic students of color choose at Minnesota State Mankato and their reasoning behind these choices. They hope that another group of Equity Ambassadors will extend their research by identifying strategies to engage domestic students of color in honors. Equity Ambassadors provide a model that reaches into the broader university community. We cannot assume that a more diverse population of students will begin applying to our programs simply by our becoming more open to the idea. Neither can we assume our eagerness to attract diverse students will enable them to overcome systemic racism, poverty, and other barriers to successful participation in honors. We will meet the goal of attracting and fostering a more diverse student population for and in honors only by actively reaching out to domestic students of color and providing experiences in and out of class that respect them for who they are and what they have to contribute.

Quentina

Anne Dahlman approached me to form a group of domestic honors students of color that would conduct conversations about our experiences in the honors program. From such conversations we were able to name a myriad of social challenges involved with being a person of color in our predominately white rural university and to consider how they play out within the honors program. We were also able to discuss why our program can appear unapproachable or foreign to students of color. During my time as an Equity Ambassador, we used the basis of our unity to craft a welcoming space for students of color in our honors community and a rough prototype that we could present to other programs.

Ginny

Last fall, with input from honors students, including Equity Ambassadors, we revised our application questions for the first time since 2009. We rephrased some of the language in order to increase access and diversity. For example, instead of asking students to list or describe leadership positions they held, our question pertaining to leadership now reads: “Identify the most meaningful school or community activity in which you have participated. How did your participation in the activity impact others in your school or community?” In other words, we now acknowledge in our application the mantra that we constantly assert to our students: leadership is about opportunities and results, not positions. This question also allows our students to engage in deeper thinking about their experiences by asking them about the effects their actions had on other individuals, not just on themselves. Since we have only recently started using our new application questions, we do not have evidence yet of their impact on our program’s diversity. We hope they will engage more students who, like Quentina, are already doing honors-like work even if they do not recognize it as such.

Quentina

The honors program allowed me to capitalize on the moves I was already making as an undergraduate student. The semester after I joined the honors program, I left to study abroad with the full support of my honors director, who crafted a practicum course geared toward my studies and travel. I was responsible for submitting critical reflections during my time abroad, promoting my growth not only as a student but also as a global citizen. The honors program gave me a platform to conceptualize, articulate, and reflect on my experience in a richer, more meaningful way.

Upon my return to Minnesota State Mankato, I was a bit apprehensive about how I would meld into the honors program. The only people I knew were the four other girls from the class I had taken the year before. I did, however, have a strong relationship with the director, which had been facilitated by our communications and my reflections while I was abroad. I found myself in her office on my early visits to the honors program. I began to look to her as a mentor who was able to see the light in me. She was constantly reassuring me about my strengths and talents while giving me opportunities to learn and grow. I kept going to her office. As a senior, I had a lot of scary changes and challenges on the horizon, and we were able to talk through them. She pointed me in the right direction.

Ginny

Every student deserves a faculty or staff member who will “see the light” in them. The challenge is to make the type of relationship that Anne Dahlman developed with Quentina accessible to each student. Attracting and admitting students from diverse backgrounds into honors is not the end of the process; the goal is to make them happy and fully participating members of the program. Building successful student relationships is key to that goal but is challenging in an era of budget cuts. One budget-friendly way to increase student access to high-impact teaching and mentoring practices is through campus partnerships, which can make a little investment go a long way. Honors programs can, for example, partner with groups including a greater diversity of students to co-host campus events, or they can purchase tickets for their students to attend cultural events, providing a comfortable venue for diverse students to get to know each other. Programs can also sponsor attendance at events that focus on diversity, access, and equity. For more than forty years, for example, Minnesota State Mankato has hosted an annual Diversity Dinner to celebrate our community’s multiculturalism, an event that provides an opportunity for meaningful partnership.

Jill

For several years, honors has partnered with the university’s Common Read program—a university-wide initiative designed to engage the community in the careful study and exploration of a common text. Each year departments across Minnesota State Mankato collaborate to create engaging experiences with the common read book. The original impetus for the study-away class to Mississippi was the adoption of *Coming of Age in Mississippi* as the common read in the fall semester of 2014. The honors program helped me design and fund the study-away class around this text. Funding, of course, was crucial to making the trip happen. We are fortunate to have an honors program willing to contribute limited funds to pedagogy that benefits honors and non-honors students alike.

Ginny

From an administrative perspective, the types of activities that promote diversity might involve spending funds and non-monetary resources on “non-honors” students. Some may balk at this idea, but our institutions should be committed to increasing the quality of education for all students and not just

the few who find their way to honors. The central values and purpose of a program and institution should guide the philosophy behind such budgetary decisions.

CONCLUSION

As Quentina suggests, many domestic students of color are already pursuing and achieving the competencies expected of honors students. Because of traditional barriers to access, however, many are doing so without the support of high-impact programs. By opening the doors of honors in ways that invite these students to become integral participants, honors can increase its diversity. The more traditional the honors program, the more its students, teachers, and administrators need to leave their comfort zones to enact change of this sort. Teaching faculty and honors staff at predominantly white institutions, most of whom are likely white themselves, must reach out to domestic students of color and invite them into honors activities. White honors students must contemplate issues of race and oppression that they have generally not had to consider. Finally, domestic students of color, according to Quentina, “must be great, boldly, while taking the necessary risks to ensure their betterment, academically and socially.”

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