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# With Great Privilege Comes Great Responsibility

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## With Great Privilege Comes Great Responsibility

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**Abstract:** This essay contends that honors education should seize the opportunity to expose our students to the horrors of our society such as “the violence against those among us with the least amount of power.” We can affirm our curricular foundation (writing, reflection, and critical thinking) by supplementing it with histories of oppression in order to better equip our students with the tools necessary to become change agents. Such a shift in curricular content and pedagogies could engender changes in our institutional practices that model successful collaboration across races, cultures, and disciplines for our students, ultimately leading the way to a more just university. Our investment in our students’ ability to take the lead in interrupting oppressive patterns, challenging the status quo, and becoming change agents will lead to a more just society.

**Keywords:** social justice, critical thinking, honors curricula

In his lead forum essay, Richard Badenhausen invites solutions to intractable problems that are seldom addressed because of the daunting nature of the task. In his seventh question, he asks:

How should we situate honors education in a culture that devalues the written word, has little time or patience for reflection and critical thinking, valorizes violence against those among us with the least amount of power, and imagines the truth itself as something of little consequence? What responsibility do we have to orient our work with students toward these horrors?

As honors programs and colleges differentiate themselves from university curricula increasingly centered on skills and vocations, and as we affirm our

position within the liberal arts tradition, the need to expose students to “the violence [perpetrated] against those among us with the least amount of power” has never been more urgent. While we should not ignore our students’ anxiety about their employment prospects, I argue that the best way for students to do well in their future professions is to be equipped to work with individuals across differences of all kinds. To this end, students must confront the racist, sexist, and otherwise bigoted histories that limit opportunities for some, privilege the advancement of others, and inhibit relationships among people with different backgrounds. Professionalization and social justice are far from being antithetical; they need to be addressed together.

We can learn from social justice activists for whom learning is fueled by a continuous desire to challenge and interrogate oneself and others. In order to prepare students to interrupt the tendency for “things to fall as they have tended to fall,” to paraphrase Sara Ahmed in *Living a Feminist Life*, honors educators must equip our students with the necessary tools to identify patterns that lead to sustained inequities and unchallenged violences. By developing pedagogies, institutional practices, and spaces that welcome all identities and foster a culture that values differences, honors programs and colleges can model the fundamental importance of inclusion and equity. By moving in this direction, we not only better prepare our students for the multicultural and interconnected world we inhabit, but we also improve our institutions.

Much of the scholarship on diversity in honors acknowledges the privileged positions occupied by honors programs and colleges as well as by the individuals who belong to them. Aaron Stoller, for example, suggests that because honors is the one percent of higher education, we have a responsibility to employ our privileges for the common good of our institutions and societies. In “Occupying Naïve America: The Resistance to Resistance,” Lisa Coleman challenges all of us in honors to effect change and embrace our ethical responsibility in order to remain relevant. With national demographics changing, our students’ origins change as well, and with them their frames of references, priorities, and modes of grappling with the world. At a time when reflection and critical thinking appear to be luxuries engaged in only by the privileged, honors educators need to demonstrate the value added of an honors education for all students.

In a utilitarian fashion, honors educators need to stress to our students that they will only access meaningful employment if they embrace reflection and critical thinking, which will foster self-awareness and refine their understanding of the complexity of their own as well as other cultures and histories.

Innovative business leaders, according to Tarun Khanna in the *Harvard Business Review*, have three common characteristics: contextual intelligence, recognizing trends and contextualizing information; contextual acuity, recognizing their personal, cultural, and organizational milieus; and cultural intelligence, recognizing that their perspective differs from that of others with different cultural backgrounds. As Clinton Robinson, executive at the international civil engineering firm Black & Veatch, is prompt to remind engineering students: “We don’t fire engineers for being bad engineers. We fire engineers because they cannot work in different cultural contexts.” What honors has to offer is a contextualization of students’ vocational learning, thereby equipping them with the tools to collaborate with peers across cultural differences and become creative and openminded leaders.

Beyond business and engineering, researchers in fields such as cross-cultural psychology have claimed the positive impact of diversity in the workplace, from a correlation between the creativity and heterogeneity of teams to the demonstrated profitability engendered by diversity in corporations. Those of us in higher education, particularly in honors, should be preparing our students for this diverse work environment and mindfully equip all students on the path to an inclusive workplace. Most of our institutions are gesturing in that direction in their mission and diversity statements, yet Sara Ahmed, in *On Being Included*, has pointed out that universities rarely contribute resources to actualize these statements much less prepare our students to do so beyond college. Those of us in honors need the tools to turn these well-intentioned statements into tangible goals.

The solid foundation of honors education can and should be enhanced by intentionally exposing our students to the history of violence and horrors perpetrated against the most vulnerable, thereby helping to interrupt patterns of oppression. While writing, reflection, and critical thinking have long been staples of honors education, we need to focus them on new kinds of content. We can enhance the fundamental skills of reflection and critical thinking by focusing them on the variety of human experiences, the historical roots of contemporary violence and inequities, and the consequences of cultural fragmentation in the face of globalization. Exposure to systems of oppression and privilege should lead our students to better understand and collaborate with people whose values and experiences differ from their own.

Recent shifts in service-learning curricula promote these transformations and critical outcomes. The ethical service model introduced by Erik Hartman and his collaborators addresses the common occurrence of well-intentioned

students seeking to help others with little knowledge of the problems that shape how people navigate hardships. By asking questions about their lives, needs, and values, students learn to recognize individuals as agents, not victims. They break the neocolonial and neoliberal cycles and contribute to changing paradigms. This model provides students with tools to examine their positionality, to ask hard questions, and to be prepared for the discomfort that stems from challenging taken-for-granted power structures. The relevance of critical engagement extends well beyond service. Just as the service-learning model impresses upon students the importance of reflexivity, of recognizing and respecting cultural differences, honors curricula at large would be greatly enhanced by prioritizing such approaches to social justice.

Honors educators should apply the same principles of critical thinking in their own self-assessments. We need to examine the ways we reaffirm privileges and oppressions within our institutional practices. We also need to engage critically with the content of our courses and the ways our classrooms are organized in order to address problematic erasures (class and sexuality among other salient differences) and the status quo that such erasures maintain. In doing so, we challenge the function of university settings as sites where elitism is tacitly reproduced. bell hooks reminds us of the many ways we are socializing the students we educate and of the responsibility we might take to ensure that the coming generation is equipped to challenge the status quo. Our willingness to introduce our students to histories of the horrors on which our collective privileges rest and to inspire our students to become change agents may bring us closer to a more just university and more just society.

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