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Congregational Honors: A Model for Inclusive Excellence

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Abstract: This essay proposes a conception of honors programs and colleges as sacred communities that acknowledge and embrace the unique human dignity of each of their members. Drawing on Ron Wolfson’s congregational model articulated in *Relational Judaism*, McMillan and Chavis’s definition of “sense of community,” and the pedagogy of educators such as Paolo Freire and bell hooks, I argue that to create a true culture of inclusive excellence, an honors program or college should not be constructed as a checklist of “exceptional experiences for exceptional students” but rather as a “community of relationships.” Leading with a student-centered, holistic focus that recognizes and cherishes the specific students served by an institution enables proactive engagement with what Richard Badenhausen has termed the “monumental demographic shifts” in higher education and expands the frequently too narrow conception of who belongs in honors. It also requires grounding our efforts in the data (from the American College Health Association and the U.S. Governmental Affairs Office, among others) reflecting that 55% of U.S. college students reported being diagnosed with or treated for an illness or disability in the past twelve months, more than 88% have felt overwhelmed, 64% report anxiety, and 30% are food insecure, while 51.7% have found academics “traumatic or very difficult.” The essay concludes by offering concrete strategies for creating authentically relational communities by ensuring that honors programs, advising, and coursework are specifically designed to recognize and welcome the diverse and complex intersectional identities of students and to address the myriad challenges they may face.

Keywords: honors pedagogy, holistic education, spirituality, diversity, and inclusive excellence

A sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together.

—McMillan and Chavis (1986), 9

When we believe that we will be welcome, that we fit or belong in a community, we have a stronger attraction to that community.

—McMillan (1996), 317

In 2013, every Jewish professional (or professional Jew) in New Orleans seemed to be reading Ron Wolfson's *Relational Judaism*. The book was required reading for the staff at the Greater New Orleans Jewish Federation and at the two campuses of the Jewish Community Center (JCC). At my almost two hundred-year-old synagogue, Touro, where the book was the summer "common read" for the clergy, lay staff, and 36-member Board of Trustees, at least five people offered to lend me their copies. Many more encouraged me to buy a copy of my own. "You have to read this book," one friend said to me, "but I just can't bear to give you mine!" What, I wondered, was in this book that seemingly everyone in my faith community was reading but of which no one at my Jesuit and Catholic faith-based institution had heard?

Although I dutifully downloaded the book into my iPad, I didn't actually begin reading *Relational Judaism* until I was flying home from my first National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) board meeting, where, as at Loyola, no one had even heard the title of this allegedly transformative volume. I still remember the sense of revelation as I highlighted these words, in pink, from Wolfson's introduction:

But improved signage, greeters at the door, and name tags represent only the beginning of a transformative process that moves an institution from an ostensibly busy place with a calendar full of programs to an organization deeply committed to becoming a *community of relationships*. What really matters is that we care about the people we seek to engage. When we genuinely care about people, we will not only welcome them; we will listen to their stories, we will share ours, and we will join together to build a . . . community that enriches our lives. (4–5, emphasis mine)

Although Wolfson was referring to synagogues—communities that, by definition, are organized around a faith orientation and set of values—his deceptively simple words are valuable for the honors community as well: “What really matters is that we care about the people we seek to engage.” The ideology of honors gives primacy to a holistic concern for students and a pedagogy that eschews the “banking model” of education, described by Paolo Freire and others, in which the active, powerful teacher is envisioned as depositing information into the passive student’s account (see also hooks, among others); rather, honors embraces engaged, experiential, discussion- and discovery-based learning. Beyond pedagogy, many honors programs are, like faith-based communities, oriented around core values: civic engagement or social justice, for example. However, as in the synagogues Wolfson describes, despite engaged classrooms, values-oriented coursework, and themed-living communities, honors colleges and programs, as well as students themselves, frequently approach and frame the honors experience as a checklist of curricular, co-curricular, and other requirements.

To be truly transformative, an honors program or college must conceive of itself as more than a checklist of “exceptional experiences for exceptional students.” Rather, we must start with a student-centered focus that not only “cares about students” but recognizes and cherishes the specific students we serve, that embraces what Richard Badenhausen terms the “monumental demographic shifts” in higher education, and starts from the premise that many in our communities are “overwhelmed.” A “community of relationships” welcomes members and listens to them, leading and extending from the lived reality of those it includes to build a shared space that, in turn, invites in and welcomes others. In short, we must create congregations.

Some readers may find the idea of a congregational model of honors unsettling, or even inappropriate. In academic settings, conversations that reference faith even vaguely are frequently greeted with suspicion or misunderstanding. (Are you dealing with a crackpot? Or worse, a conservative?) Many have experienced congregations or faith-based communities as far from welcoming. But, although the percentage of those in the U.S. with no religious affiliation is growing rapidly—according to a 2015 study by the Pew Research Institute, 35% of millennials identify as “nones” (Lipka) and many people feel discomfort around questions of religion *per se*—the human craving for community is almost universal. Whether or not they belong to a mosque or a church, people want a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, whether it is advocating for a cause, campaigning for a candidate, or

screaming their heads off for the Steelers or the Boston Red Sox. In students, “sense of belonging” (or lack thereof) is a strong predictor of retention, graduation, and student wellbeing (see, for example, Supiano).

An advertising campaign from the 1960s signaled the mainstreaming of rye bread in declaring, “You don’t have to be Jewish to love Levy’s.” Similarly, I would argue that you do not have to be religious to lead a congregation. What distinguishes a congregation, in the sense in which I am using the word, is that it is a community that originates in a foundational understanding of the innate dignity of each individual human being. Whether that understanding, in turn, is grounded in a belief that, as my own tradition holds, we are created *betzelim elohim* (“in the image and likeness of God”), we can all strive to create relational communities, where students, along with faculty, administrators, and staff, feel welcome to bring their full, authentic selves, and where the unique, human value of each individual is respected and embraced. This community is one where everyone is not expected to dress or think the same way or to engage in all the same activities; it embraces Goths and those into anime, preppies and gamers, trans- and cisgender students, first-generation students and those whose great-grandparents went to college. Starting from the premise that each member is not simply a checklist of identities but a uniquely valued individual, worthy of love, allows us to bring the full spectrum of the community together in a space where we can find common ground across differences, respectful disagreement, shared values, and support.

Psychologists David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis have defined a “sense of community” as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (9). As such, a true community, like truly engaged pedagogy, goes beyond the transactional to a space of collaboration, where individuals are supported and cared for by each other. Authentically welcoming students and listening to their stories can create the “sense of belonging” that we know has a profound impact on whether students persist in or graduate from either honors or its institution. The community of “genuinely caring about people” that Wolfson calls for and “listening to their stories” require that we intentionally address stereotype threat (the fear that one is at risk of conforming to negative stereotypes about one’s identity) and imposter syndrome (in which students doubt their accomplishments and fear being revealed as frauds), both of which can be especially challenging to students who may be first in their families to attend college, living in poverty, suffering from mental illness, or identifying with a marginalized community.

A people-first community also requires that we attend to data. A 2019 Government Affairs Office meta-review of thirty-one studies suggested that an estimated 30% of United States college students are food insecure (Harris). According to the National College Health Assessment conducted by the American College Health Association (ACHA), 55.4% of college students reported being diagnosed with or treated for an illness or disability in the past twelve months; 55% reported having felt hopeless; more than 88% reported feeling overwhelmed by all they have to do; 64% reported anxiety; and 64% reported that they have felt very lonely. The same study found that 51.7% of those surveyed reported that, in the past twelve months, academics had been “traumatic or very difficult to handle.”

Although we may talk about increasing diversity in honors, students who are of color, who are transgender, who live in poverty, who are parents or veterans, or who are the first in their families to attend college may not perceive themselves as welcomed or even invited. Citing research by Lee Daniels, Caroline Sotello Viernes Turner drew out the metaphor of students of color feeling not like family but like “guests in someone else’s house.”

Guests are not family, whose foibles and mistakes are tolerated. . . .
 Guests must follow the family’s wishes without question, keep out of certain rooms in the house, and always be on their best behavior. . . .
 Guests have no history in the house they occupy. There are no photographs on the wall that reflect their image. (356)

Although Turner was writing in the 1990s, recent studies strongly suggest that campus climate has not improved dramatically for many students. Elsewhere, I have called for honors admissions policies to move from a primary focus on GPA and especially test scores toward a holistic consideration of each student; Badenhausen has encouraged a more inclusive framing of “success scripts” (Yavneh Klos, “Thinking Critically”; Badenhausen). Changing the way we invite people to honors and how we offer the initial welcome is crucial, but if our goal is to create a genuine sense of belonging, our obligations go beyond questions of recruitment to address how our programs and colleges can serve the students actually sitting in our classrooms. However important it is that we welcome students to our programs, designing community-building orientations and classroom activities in order to create an authentically relational community is not simply a matter of recognizing and welcoming the many intersectional identities of our students. We must ensure that we know who our students are and that our programs, our advising, and our coursework are specifically designed for them.

We all, I am sure, have colleagues who care deeply about experiential, discussion-based seminars, and yet fantasize, Eliza Doolittle-style, about the idealized students they wish they were teaching. “If only we could get her to pay attention!” one professor exclaimed, about a student with accommodations for ADHD. “If only we could get him to quit his job!” said another, referring to a Pell-eligible student working to cover tuition costs. If only, I respond to such comments, we could appreciate the strengths and barriers students bring to honors! If only, instead of viewing underperforming students as lazy, we admired their persistence in choosing to attend school and worked with them to overcome the obstacles! If only we started with the premise that most of our students are struggling to address at least one of these challenges:

- Anxiety or mental illness
- Financial insecurity
- Gender identity issues
- Relational or familial issues
- Physical illness, of self or a family member, or need for childcare

If only we could welcome students as they are, into a community of relationships! Wouldn't THAT be lovely!

Embracing our students as they are need not be hypothetical. For example, on a programmatic level, we can anticipate students' needs by providing:

- Community-building orientation activities;
- Anti-bias training for faculty, administrators and students;
- Behavioral and mental health first-aid training;
- Workshops and anti-stress activities such as drumming, knitting, other crafts, or yoga, and newsletter articles about how individual faculty members handle stress so that students can see that they are not unique in facing challenges;
- Widely accessible lists of and links to both on- and off-campus resources such as disability services, the counseling center, community-based low-cost healthcare, job lists, food pantries, domestic violence centers, and houses of worship;

- Within honors spaces, healthy snacks or meals, band-aids and feminine-care products, rocking chairs and recliners, and comfort dogs or other animals.

Because the classroom is generally a defining component of the honors experience, faculty development is essential, particularly in pedagogical strategies that contribute to students' sense of belonging. Cia Verschelden's *Bandwidth Recovery: Helping students Reclaim Cognitive Resources Lost to Poverty, Racism, and Social Marginalization* provides many resources and classroom strategies for increasing sense of belonging, including acknowledging the knowledge, values, and experiences that students from all backgrounds bring to class as well as the challenges they may be facing. For example, Verschelden recommends a two-day "grace period" for any student who does not meet the stated due date for a paper.

The "grace period" is helpful to this discussion as an example of universal design: Universal Design for Education (UDE) goes beyond accessible design for people with disabilities to make all aspects of the educational experience more inclusive for students, parents, staff, instructors, administrators, and visitors with a great variety of characteristics; these characteristics include those related to gender, race and ethnicity, age, stature, disability, and learning style (Burgstahler). The grace period meets the needs of a broad spectrum of the community, including the professor. A student with anxiety is spared the additional anxiety of meeting with the professor to work out an extension. A student who does not generally suffer from anxiety but has multiple assignments due the same week is not placing a student with documented mental illness at a disadvantage when she avails herself of a policy allowing each student a two-day "grace period," no questions asked. For either student, the uncertainty of getting an extension or the concern that the student will now seem "less" to the instructor is obviated; the professor is spared the time of working out individual arrangements, the confusion of an often vague directive from the office of disabilities ("allow flexibility in deadlines"), and the anxiety of determining what is fair. For each—the anxious student, busy student, and professor—as well as for any other students in the class who have multiple deadlines or suffer from undocumented anxiety, the sense of belonging is enhanced by recognition that the policy is designed to meet the respective needs of the members of the community.

Websites such as the one developed by the University of Washington's Center for Universal Design in Education provide useful information about adapting educational environments to meet the needs of all learners, but the

most helpful resource is available to anyone who participates in honors: our students, who, if they trust us to listen, will share their concerns, hopes, and dreams with us and, if invited, collaborate with us to create a welcoming and inclusive community of relationships.

Ron Wolfson's *Relational Judaism*, a book about strengthening congregations rather than about pedagogy, has encouraged me to consider honors programs, and honors itself, as a sacred community that acknowledges and embraces the common humanity in each of our students and in all of us. To view education in the context of the sacred is not, I know, original to me. For example, in his final NCHC monograph, the late and beloved Samuel Schuman (z"l) revealed in the title his ideal for honors: *If Honors Students Were People: Holistic Honors Education*. His thoughtful exploration of holistic honors education was a reminder to consider not just the intellectual but the physical and spiritual needs of our students. Similarly, the *cura personalis* (care of the whole person) at the heart of Jesuit pedagogy, based in the *Spiritual Exercises* of the order's founder, Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), calls us to enter into relationship with our students and to recognize them as unique individuals. In educating students to be men and women for and with others, regardless of career or vocation, Jesuit pedagogy reminds us, regardless of our worldview, to direct our efforts to a higher purpose than self.

Reminders of the innate dignity of each human being cannot be repeated too frequently in an age of anxiety when far too many seek comfort by shutting their ears and eyes to all who do not share their concerns, their views, and their experiences. An inclusive vision of honors that invites and welcomes the full diversity of students to learn from and listen to each other and to build shared values across difference can help mitigate the challenges facing our communities, globally and locally, and strengthen the communities themselves.

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