

A Life-Transformative Education for the 21st Century: Exploring, Creating, and Leading Through Honors

Jaclyn M. Chancey; Jennifer Lease Butts

Enrichment Programs, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Abstract

This article explores the theoretical underpinnings of life-transformative education and gifted education and applies them to a university honors program. Life-transformative education requires authentic learning experiences and rich mentorship relationships to promote happiness, well-being, and a sense of purpose. This is intended for all students, so the literature on gifted education is used to differentiate an honors education. Several competing paradigms exist, and the University of Connecticut Honors Program bases its theoretical framework and program design on the talent development models of Joseph Renzulli. The article concludes with a closer look at the honors leadership experience and preparing students to solve 21st century problems.

Keywords: College honors; university honors; life-transformative education; gifted education; leadership development.

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The events of 2020 have been a constant reminder of the need to adapt even as circumstances are continually changing, as almost everything we know about the practice of higher education has been turned on its head over the past few months. Scholarly habits remind us to turn to research and literature for guidance. Even twenty years into the 21st century, it is still common to see articles appearing that discuss what higher education should be, consist of, and look like in the current century. Many higher education practitioners have spent their careers in these liminal years spanning the last century and the current one and are now being asked to continue unfinished work from the past and weave it into envisioned themes for the future, even when the future is literally evolving by the minute.

One method of bringing calm to chaos is to draw upon sound practices – to go back to what is known to be effective in promoting student learning, growth, and development as an anchor in the proverbial storm. The format of interactions with students may have shifted over the past year, yet the fundamental nature of these connections has become more important than ever. It has been vital to find new ways to engage students, to promote creativity as a means of resiliency, and to develop the talents and skills of students so that they are better equipped to face the challenges ahead.

This article aims to explore foundational research and theories pertaining to student growth and development, student learning, creativity, and talent development from the last thirty years and bring these ideas forward to create new models for higher education in the 21st century, with the example of a theoretically-based and research-informed honors education serving as a model for consideration and implementation. To begin, broad constructs describing the aims and goals of a 21st century college education will be outlined. Next, the article will explore conceptions of giftedness in college students, including differentiation, gifted individuals, and talent development. The article will then consider the translation of theory to practice via the description of a model for honors education employed at the University of Connecticut Honors Program. Finally, the article will conclude with an examination of the leadership challenges facing students in the 21st century and the role of collegiate education in preparing them with the problems solving skills, creativity, and empathy necessary to address these challenges, create solutions, and lead in their implementation.

Life-transformative education

A recently formed group of college presidents and provosts, the Coalition for Life-Transformative Education (CLTE) has authored a white paper arguing that, if the 20th century goal for a college graduate was financial security and upward mobility, the 21st century goals should add a sense of purpose, social engagement, a healthy lifestyle, and engagement at work or in a career (CLTE, n.d.). Higher education can promote well-being and happiness in addition to a mastery of materials and skills. To do this, colleges and university must “engender in students three things: identity, agency, and purpose” (CLTE, n.d., p. 8). Furthermore, the authors propose that these are fostered through a *life-transformative education* (LTE), which has two key features:

(1) Authentic learning experiences in which students apply what they have learned to real world situations, often with real clients and professional mentors, and (2) emotionally supportive mentors, the kind of mentor who not only advises and encourages but who shares a genuine interest in each student’s hopes and dreams. (CLTE, n.d., p. 8)

The coalition posits that the goal of higher education should be to bring life-transformative education to scale, such that every college student engages in experiential learning in an emotionally supportive environment.

Much of the scholarship that informed the components of LTE has been written in response to recent articles and studies about the state of higher education. The emphasis on helping students to develop identity, agency, and a sense of purpose has existed in the literature on identity development and the psychosocial development of college students for many years, though. The parallels between identity development and the concept of self-authorship, for example, correlate to all three of the LTE concepts of identity, agency, and purpose. In addition, the relevance of peers, mentors, and learning-based relationships is also worth exploring as an area of overlap between theories and the concepts of LTE.

The college student development literature is replete with articles on identity development in a variety of formats. There are numerous researchers who have found that the years students spend in college coincide with the years of transition to adulthood, and therefore present an excellent opportunity to encourage positive growth and development (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1963). Developed via a longitudinal study of college students and drawing upon the self-authorship work of Kegan (1994), Marcia Baxter Magolda’s (2001) concept of self-authorship involves moving from an external view of self to one that is defined internally. Helping students to rely less on authority and more on their own views and ideas is a cornerstone of higher education; designing educational practices that help them to trust their internal voice, build their internal foundation, and secure their internal commitments (Baxter Magolda, 2008) is key.

Both Baxter Magolda (2001) and Kegan (1994) note that relationships are pivotal vehicles in the development of self-authorship. These relationships can be formed between students and their faculty/staff mentors or among peers. Research supports the fact that peer relationships in particular are an important source of growth and development for college students (Astin, 1993; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kegan, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Peers help shape an individual’s identity through encouraging one another to develop autonomy through interdependence, manage emotions, and develop mature interpersonal relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). It is a paradox that peer relationships can be integral to self-authorship, growth, and development, yet it is a paradox that allows for the sum of interactions to spur change and maximize growth and learning during the developmental college years.

The goals of LTE along with identity development and self-authorship are applicable to all students in higher education. These concepts are most effective, though, when they can be implemented in the aggregate for all students and simultaneously tailored to meet the needs of sub-populations of students. For example, the developmental needs around identity development and self-authorship are different for returning adult students than they are for students in the traditional age

range of 18 to 22 years old. BIPOC students also have needs specific to their identity development that should be considered, in addition to giving consideration to the ways structural racism and systems of oppression shape the environment in which these students learn. Gifted students are another sub-population worthy of a more tailored approach to learning and development. As such, consideration of the literature on gifted students in colleges provides a helpful framework for this discussion.

Conceptions of giftedness in college students

At any post-secondary institution, no matter how selective, there will be some students with significantly higher levels of academic talent than the institution's average, and their educational needs may not be met through the standard curriculum (Robinson, 1997). There is a small but growing body of knowledge concerning how successful colleges have been at filling this gap for "gifted" students (Rinn & Plucker, 2004, 2019; Robinson, 1997), but there is also disagreement as to the nature of this gap and the definition of giftedness itself. The three paradigms of gifted education proposed by Dai and Chen (2013) are useful lenses through which to view diverse conceptions of giftedness and how they might apply to college students in general and to an honors program specifically.

The differentiation paradigm

Proponents of differentiation emphasize that every student has individual needs that vary across contexts. Thus, rather than focus on "gifted" education *per se*, they discuss ways in which each student's needs can be identified and served in classrooms and in other educational settings. Researchers like Borland (2005) resist the label of giftedness at all. Others (e.g., Robinson, 2005) discuss gifted education as parallel to other types of special education services: a defined population of students has needs that are significantly different from the norm, and without specific attention those needs will not be met.

The biggest strength of differentiation is its flexibility. However, it may not be effective in meeting the needs of gifted students in the elementary and secondary grades (Hertberg-Davis, 2009). This poses significant concerns for a college or university setting, where faculty members' professional training and credentialing rewards disciplinary expertise far above any pedagogical skill. Furthermore, differentiation's centering of individual student needs in all contexts lends itself to institution-wide practices more than to a distinct honors program within a larger college or university.

The gifted child paradigm

Dai and Chen (2013) grouped several seminal theories under the "gifted child" umbrella, most notably the early work of Lewis Terman and Leta Stetter Hollingworth. Terman's and Hollingworth's focus on IQ as the sole measure of giftedness has largely fallen out of favor, but the more general idea that a child may be identified as having a trait of "giftedness" has not. In fact, many U.S. states define gifted students based in part on standardized test scores and/or classroom performance (National Association for Gifted Children & Council of State Program Directors for the Gifted, 2000).

Gifted child paradigms have contributed social-emotional theories that can be useful in a college or university setting, including asynchrony (Morelock, 1996; Silverman, 1997) and overexcitabilities (Daniels & Piechowski, 2008, Piechowski, 1986). Some university honors programs also operate in a gifted child model, using standardized test scores for the bulk of their admissions decisions. Unfortunately, this places honors in the position of perpetuating racial and socioeconomic inequities from elementary and secondary education (Geiser, 2009; Smith & Vitus Zagurski, 2013).

The talent development paradigm

In some ways, talent development conceptions could be seen as sharing the best features of the other two paradigms, at least when considering relevance to a college or university honors program. They generally include some form of identification, but the criteria are flexible and include context, such as using a holistic admissions process that uses multiple indicators for suitability for

honors work. Services provided are likewise flexible, since they are intended to develop students' growth and development in a specific talent area. There are multiple theories that fit this paradigm, and the University of Connecticut is the home of one of the preeminent scholars in this area, Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor Joseph Renzulli. His conception of giftedness, which is detailed further in the next section, proved to be best suited for implementation at the UConn Honors Program.

From theory to practice

The University of Connecticut (UConn) is an institutional member of the Coalition for Life-Transformative Education (CLTE), and as such is committed to bringing life-transformative experiences to every student on all UConn campuses. UConn is in year two of LTE implementation, and though there have been some delays related to COVID-19, the university community is making excellent progress in bringing this initiative forward. The UConn Honors Program adopted a new theoretical framework in 2016 and followed this with new program requirements in 2018. As detailed below, the UConn Honors framework and implementation is fit seamlessly within the LTE paradigm, allowing honors to serve as a "test case" for the larger university LTE initiative.

Theoretical framework for UConn honors

As life-transformative education begins to take shape as the cornerstone of a UConn undergraduate education, how should an honors education differ from the overall UConn undergraduate experience? In 2016, the UConn Honors Program governance board began to answer that question by adopting a theoretical framework made up of three foundational theories. The first is the Three Ring Conception of Giftedness, in which Renzulli provides the operational definition of giftedness:

Giftedness consists of an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits — these clusters being above-average general abilities, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity. Gifted and talented children are those possessing or capable of developing this composite set of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance. (Renzulli, 1978, p. 261)

Renzulli refers to this type of gifted behavior as creative productivity, which is the core goal of UConn Honors. The Three Ring Conception of Giftedness guides admissions, welcoming students who may have been identified as gifted by their elementary or secondary schools as well as those gifted learners who, for a variety of reasons, were not identified. This framework promotes a broad net for identification (Renzulli & Reis, 1997); approximately 10% of University of Connecticut undergraduates are enrolled in the honors program.

The second foundational theory, the Enrichment Triad Model (Renzulli, 1976), describes three types of enrichment that help students move from the potential for gifted behaviors to demonstrating them. Type 1 enrichment focuses on broadening students' exposure to fields or potential problems to solve, so that they may find something that excites their creativity and task commitment. In Type 2 enrichment activities, students build advanced skills that they will need for creative productivity. These skills might be very specific to a student's project or more generally related to one of the three rings. Finally, Type 3 activities are those that provide direct support for creative productivity: helping students align their three rings, create something new, and disseminate it outside of the classroom. Even though the Enrichment Triad Model was developed in elementary and secondary schools, nothing limits it to such settings. Most honors programs are designed to provide learning and activities above and beyond typical options for college students. Since enrichment is defined as anything outside the standard curriculum, these three types of activities may take place in honors classes as well as co-curricular settings.

Renzulli's more recent work gives direction to creative productivity while also describing some of the co-cognitive factors that affect whether a student moves from potential to actual creative

productivity. Operation Houndstooth (Renzulli, 2002) addresses the question of what influences someone to *make a difference* and positively affect the world around them; in doing so, Renzulli explicitly connects social good, creative productivity, and life satisfaction or happiness. The six factors in the model (optimism, courage, romance with a topic or discipline, sensitivity to human concerns, energy, and vision or sense of destiny) can be addressed during any of the three types of enrichment or through other curricular or co-curricular activities. Including this final component in the theoretical framework further clarifies the goals of UConn Honors: creative productivity helps change the world, and it also helps honors students to be happier and more satisfied with their lives. This echoes the goals of life-transformative education as well.

Updating UConn honors after 50 years

The adoption of the theoretical framework was the beginning of a two-year process of redesigning the UConn Honors requirements. Putting the framework into practice required a large amount of translation, as all of the research and published implementations of Renzulli's work were situated in elementary and secondary education. (See Renzulli & Reis, 1997, for a thorough treatment of this topic.) To clarify what changes occurred and the reasoning behind them, this section will briefly describe the previous set of requirements, issues that had arisen, and principles guiding the redesign before moving on to detail the new requirements and awards.

Prior to 2018, UConn Honors operated in what is known as a “2+2” model, in which students spent their first two years completing honors in general education and similar courses and their second two years fulfilling honors requirements in their major. Like many similar programs, UConn Honors awarded a mid-career certificate and transcript notation for the general honors requirements, and only the honors in the major requirements were included in the honors degree. Over time, students began to express frustration with the mid-career certificate, simultaneously being unclear regarding its value and wishing that the effort they put forth over the first two years would be recognized at graduation. The relative rigidity of the 2+2 structure also made it difficult to offer the full honors experience to students who entered honors at the end of their first year: they were not yet ready to start honors in their major, but they could not complete their mid-career certificate requirements in a single year.

While it was clear that the 2+2 model no longer fit the needs of UConn Honors, there were strengths that needed to be maintained, especially the fact that over 50% of students who enter the university as honors students graduate with the honors degree. Despite the independence of the two awards, students who earned the mid-career certificate were three times as likely to earn an honors degree when compared to their peers who did not earn the certificate, a relationship that held for over 15 years. In 2003, changes were made to students' honors experience during their first and second years, primarily related to building honors community through a required residential learning community and redesigned first-year experiences courses. The first cohort affected by these changes completed both awards at substantially higher rates, and these increased rates were sustained over successive cohorts (Goodstein & Szarek, 2013). When individual students' engagement with the mid-career certificate requirements was investigated in connection with likelihood of honors graduation, relationships were found with early engagement in honors courses, taking at least one specially designed interdisciplinary honors course, and attending designated honors events (Chancey & Szarek, 2018).

A desire to update honors to reflect many changes over the fifty years of the program resulted in the decision to create new honors requirements. A task force of faculty, staff, and students was convened in 2016 to develop the new requirements. They were challenged to create a program that would be sufficiently flexible to accommodate students of any major, at any University of Connecticut campus, who enter at any of three admissions points; would be able to scale to serve 10% of UConn undergraduates without bottlenecks; would meet the National Collegiate Honors Council (2017) guideline that honors should constitute 20-25% of a student's coursework without adding to the total number of credits required for degree; and was aligned with the new theoretical framework,

and to do all of this without losing the strengths of the existing structure. The result was two overlapping graduation awards, which are described in the following sections and summarized in Table 1.

Honors scholar in the major

The Honors Scholar in the Major award represents depth of study and creative productivity within a discipline. The coursework component of the award consists of 15 honors credits in the major or related fields. (To put this in context, most undergraduate degrees require a total of 120 credits, with 36 in the major or a related area, over an expected four-year career, and most courses are worth 3 or 4 credits.) At least 3 of the 15 honors credits are earned in while working on the student's honors thesis. There is also a co-curricular "Engagement in the Major Field" requirement, in which the student and their faculty honors advisor agree upon a co-curricular experience that will enrich the student's learning in a manner appropriate to the field.

As shown in Table 1, this award consists of Type 2 and Type 3 enrichment activities. Type 3 activities are the goal of the honors experience: creative productivity, represented here by the student's thesis. The standards for the thesis are set at the department level and may not always resemble a scholarly research thesis, so long as students apply their disciplinary knowledge and skills to create a unique product that is beyond what is expected of undergraduates in that major. The other honors credits in the major or related are largely Type 2 experiences, in that they build the discipline-specific skills that lead to the thesis. Engagement in the major field is intentionally delegated to the departments and individual honors advisors, so those experiences could fit anywhere in the framework depending on the field and on a student's needs, but most appear to be either Type 2 skill development (such as required membership in a professional organization) or some extension of the thesis Type 3 (such as presenting at a local research conference).

The lack of Type 1 experiences in the Honors Scholar in the Major award structure is not necessarily out of sync with the UConn Honors theoretical framework. Creative productivity is always the end goal of a Renzulli-based program. The different types of enrichment solely exist as a way to get students to that point. Because this award is located completely *within a major*, the intentional exploration found in Type 1 activities may not be needed. On the other hand, some classes or other in-major experiences also may serve as explorations of the different sub-fields within the major or problems that the student may address in their thesis.

The Honors Scholar in the Major award is very similar to the previous honors graduation award, which was simply Honors Scholar. From a theoretical perspective, the connection to the major field is strengthened, resulting in the removal of a couple of breadth requirements that took place outside of the major. The most significant change, though, is the addition of the engagement in the major requirement, which resulted from the task force's belief that a high-quality honors experience took place both inside and outside the classroom.

University honors laureate

The University Honors Laureate (UHL) award represents additional breadth of honors work, including intentional exploration as well as creative productivity beyond the major field. UHL consists of 30 honors credits plus three co-curricular requirements. Students must earn the Honors Scholar in the Major award in order to earn UHL, and the 15 honors credits required for Honors Scholar count toward the 30 total honors credits required for UHL. The specific requirements for these 30 honors credits and co-curricular experiences are detailed below and summarized in Table 1.

Intentional exploration within the curriculum (Type 1 enrichment) is represented by multiple overlapping distribution requirements within the 30 honors credits. Students must earn at least 3 honors credits in each of three epistemological divisions: arts and humanities; social sciences; and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. They must also earn at least 3 honors credits in

courses designated as fulfilling a diversity & multiculturalism requirement; this directly addresses some of the Houndstooth-related factors in addition to serving as Type 1 enrichment. Finally, students must earn at least 3 honors credits in courses designed to provide an honors interdisciplinary experience, exposing them to new possibilities as well as introducing them to the skills inherent to interdisciplinary work (Type 2).

Exploration also occurs outside of the classroom through the honors events requirement. Students attend and reflect upon at least 10 honors events across 5 categories: career, professional, and personal development; honors community development; academic and interdisciplinary engagement; multiculturalism and global citizenship; and social change, service, and sustainability. Most of these event categories also promote the development of Houndstooth factors. For example, an academic and interdisciplinary engagement event might seek to spark romance with a topic or discipline, while an event in the social change, service, and sustainability category would likely promote sensitivity to human concerns.

Students who complete the UHL requirements demonstrate creative productivity through two additional co-curricular requirements. The first, called “Academics in Action,” is almost entirely student defined, so long as their experience is (1) academic in nature; (2) representative of creativity or innovation; and (3) shared with an authentic audience. Students may not use their thesis for this requirement, but they may use an extension of their thesis, and some students are able to use their engagement in the major field experiences. Other students choose to do something outside of their major for this requirement. The other co-curricular Type 3 requirement, which also addresses many Houndstooth factors, is the UHL Leadership Experience. This requirement is described in detail in the following section.

Table 1: University of Connecticut honors award requirements aligned with elements of theoretical framework.

Requirement	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Houndstooth
Honors Scholar in the Major				
15 honors credits in the major or related		X		
Approved thesis			X	
Engagement in major field		X ^a	X ^a	
University Honors Laureate (additional requirements only)				
15 honors credits		X		
Epistemological distribution	X			
Diversity & multiculturalism	X			X
Interdisciplinarity	X	X		
Honors events	X			X
Academics in Action			X	
Leadership Experience		X	X	X

^a The Engagement in major field requirement is determined at the department level. Some have opted for additional Type 2 experiences while others have determined that Type 3 is more appropriate. Type 1 is possible but unlikely.

The University Honors Laureate award is a major change for UConn Honors, representing a three- or four-year honors experience rather than the previous 2+2 model. It does carry forward the important features of the mid-career certificate, including the special honors interdisciplinary courses, an enhanced honors events requirement, and the expectation that students engage in honors coursework early and consistently. The removal of the “first two-years” and “second two-years” structure also means that there is more flexibility inherent in the completion of UHL compared to the

previous model; students can join the Honors Program at any entry point allowed in the admissions process and complete the UHL requirements. The theoretical framework and intentional design of the new components also allows for clearer messaging for current and prospective students: UConn Honors helps students *explore, create, and lead*.

University honors laureate leadership experience: Preparing students for 21st century problems

The Leadership Experience for students completing the UHL requirements combines the Operation Houndstooth factors of sensitivity to human concerns, optimism, courage, and vision or sense of destiny with the LTE concepts of developing identity, agency, and purpose. While most honors students enter college with some form of leadership experience, this activity helps students hone their natural talents, learn new leadership skills, apply those skills to a problem of their own choosing, and prepare to solve the known and unknown challenges that await in the 21st century.

The UHL Leadership experience consists of three phases, each of which incorporates reflective learning in addition to peer coaching (UConn Honors, n.d.). Reflection is conducted through an ePortfolio, the use of which can maximize the effectiveness of high impact educational practice (Watson, Kuh, Rhodes, Light, & Chen, 2016). The use of these peer coaches, called Honors Guides for Peer Success (Honors GPSes), intentionally leverages the known influence of peers in this stage of students' identity development while providing another mentoring relationship as they develop agency and purpose as leaders.

The first phase (preparation and planning) begins when students attend an Honors GPS-led workshop. This workshop explains the process, the timeline typically followed, and the use of the ePortfolio system where students will record their plans, activities, and reflections. More importantly, this is where students begin to articulate their own personal definitions of leadership and consider their role in multiple communities. As the first phase continues, students develop a Leadership Action Plan that in which they select a community, identify a problem, and develop a feasible intervention that aligns with their community's needs and their own definition of leadership. They complete the Leadership Action Plan with individual feedback and coaching from an Honors GPS.

The second phase is simply Action. Students enact their leadership plan and can continue to rely on coaching from their assigned Honors GPS as needed. It is important to note that, while the Leadership Action Plan should be *feasible*, success should also not be guaranteed. Through coaching, students learn from failure—possibly even more than they do from success—and this failure does not prevent them from completing the UHL Leadership Experience.

A student's Leadership Experience concludes with the third phase: Reflection. Students are prompted to reflect on any changes that have taken place in their community of as a result of their leadership, any changes that took place in themselves, their own learning, and how this experience may influence their future plans. Additional coaching during this phase leverages the partnership created with the Honors GPS to further solidify the student's learning.

Implementing the Leadership Experience, as well as the other University Honors Laureate co-curricular requirements, posed some logistical challenges. There are over 2,400 students enrolled in the UConn Honors Program, and there was no existing mechanism to track experiences that existed outside the classroom. The implementation of an ePortfolio system provided this while also enhancing student reflective practices and creating records that may be analyzed for assessment and program evaluation. Reflective learning also requires substantive feedback; the Honors GPS peer advising team is a cost-effective staffing model for feedback and coaching at this large scale.

A hopeful vision for the future

The process to redefine a UConn Honors education began prior to the arrival of the Life-Transformative Education initiative on the campus, yet the Renzulli-based theoretical model,

implemented through Honors Scholar in the Major and University Honors Laureate, and the guiding practices of LTE are complementary and supportive of one another. Each acts as a bolster for the other, creating an experience that is greater than the sum of its parts. Students will have greater sense of self, purpose and direction, and confidence regarding their skills and talents. This self-definition will have occurred via relationships with others, which promotes empathy and connection: two vital attributes for working together to combat systemic oppression and face other global problems. Complex problems surely lie ahead in the rest of the 21st century, but they can be solved if college graduates leave campus with the tools to create and implement change for the common good, as well as having proven themselves already capable of doing so.

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Address

Jaclyn M. Chancey;

UConn Honors Program, Unit 4147;
368 Fairfield Way, Storrs, CT 06269-4147; USA.

e-Mail: jaclyn.chancey@uconn.edu