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Fostering Community in the Face of COVID: Case Studies from Two Community College Honors Programs

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Abstract: This article features the work of two community college honors programs toward establishing and fostering community amid the COVID-19 crisis. Authors describe shared goals and priorities for their students during abrupt and extended shutdowns of both campuses. While working in tandem to ensure that their students felt cared for and contented, each program achieved the same goal in different ways, leading to long-lasting changes to be preserved after the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; virtual communities; mental health of students; Johnson County Community College (KS)—Honors Program; Hillsborough Community College (FL)—Dr. Lydia R. Daniel Honors Program

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INTRODUCTION

Two community college honors programs of different sizes and in different parts of the United States both struggled not only to maintain but to enhance a sense of community to foster honors students' success during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the differences as well as similarities of the two programs' approaches, the overall goal was the same: to make sure students felt engaged and cared for during a socially distant and unprecedented year. In the process, both programs discovered the value of revamping

more traditional forms of in-person community building and social engagement to successfully create a sense of togetherness in a virtual arena.

THE PROGRAMS: HILLSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE (HCC) AND JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE (JCCC)

Hillsborough Community College (HCC), with five campus locations throughout the county surrounding Tampa, Florida, is home to the Dr. Lydia R. Daniel Honors Program. Founded 25 years ago by its namesake, the program has grown to more than 280 associate degree-seeking students in a college of more than 45,000 students. The program is administered by a director, a coordinator, an academic advisor, a senior staff assistant, and a part-time student assistant. Each term, approximately forty faculty teach honors classes offered on all five campuses. Prior to the pandemic, honors classes at HCC had never been offered online.

To remain in the HCC Honors Program, students must sign a contract upon admission agreeing to take a minimum of two honors classes each term. In order to graduate from honors and receive a medallion, they must complete 24 or more honors credit hours and have a GPA at 3.0 or above. Students who earn between 12 and 23 credit hours in honors receive an honors certificate.

Johnson County Community College (JCCC) is in the suburbs of Kansas City, on the Kansas side. During any given semester, JCCC enrolls about 18,000 students in both online and in-person classes although 80% of courses were delivered online in fall 2020 due to COVID. JCCC's honors program was established in 1987 but has grown substantially in the last five years with increased course offerings; the honors program offers a dozen classes per semester and serves a hundred students. None of JCCC's honors courses had been offered online before COVID.

Admission to and graduation from the JCCC Honors Program require a 3.5 GPA; to remain in the program, students are expected to enroll in one honors course every term. To graduate with honors, students must complete five honors courses, participate in two engaged learning experiences (such as service or study abroad), and give one public presentation on a topic of their choice—more often than not, a research project. A small staff, including a director, a coordinator of service learning, an administrative assistant, and two part-time student assistants are fully devoted to honors students' success. A student counselor is designated for honors but is not officially part of the honors staff.

CHALLENGES

At both JCCC and HCC, the administrative staffs are consistently working to improve the honors student experience through extensive in-person facetime with students, faculty, and administrators, e.g., students frequently drop by the honors office, attend in-person appointments with faculty, see each other in class, participate in collaborative projects outside of class, hang out together, and study in honors-designated lounges. But on March 13, 2020, the last day of in-person honors classes at both JCCC and HCC, all of that changed. With only virtual venues to continue our work with students, we knew that maintaining pre-COVID levels of student engagement and motivation would be challenging, but we agreed that we would do whatever it took to adapt to the new normal and support our students. With that philosophy as our guide, we set about to address the following challenges:

- Ensure that honors students stayed both physically and mentally healthy during this unprecedented historical moment.
- Maintain honors student engagement.
- Confirm that honors students continued to prioritize their participation in honors while facing new and varied demands on their time and attention.
- Boost student morale.

Our honors teams started to work right away. Our need to use new digital platforms like Zoom and Teams required self-training on behalf of faculty, administrators, and students, as did our urgent need to adapt our learning management systems to this new normal. We had to learn how to maintain pre-COVID levels of engagement and motivation by adapting old forms of student community development to the digital educational space.

ADAPTING AND THRIVING

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing issues in our programs as it no doubt did in honors programs throughout the country, but it also provided opportunities for new approaches and fresh perspectives.

Hillsborough Community College (HCC)

Immediately following spring break, the honors office staff met to respond to the impending needs of the honors community. All classes at the

college were directed to online delivery for the rest of the term. For the five weeks that remained of the term, faculty did a remarkable job despite the drastically new way of presenting and receiving material, and they remained sensitive to both students' and each other's fears and insecurities about the months to come.

Academic advising went online to Zoom and Teams. Appointments with the honors advisor did not skip a beat as she coached the students on how to respond to appointments; she remained positive and supportive with inconsistencies in attendance and punctuality. Students adapted quickly to making, accepting, and attending appointments online. The entire staff modeled "cameras on" behavior when meeting to capture the feeling that we were as "live" as we could be considering the circumstances.

Celebrating our success is key to an honors community, and celebrate we did. One of the concerns foremost on students' minds initially in March (particularly for those graduating) was whether we would still have our Medallion Ceremony. This event has traditionally occurred the night before graduation and has become the most significant event for many of our students and alumni. Without knowing how we would do it, the staff reassured our students that "the show would go on." We scripted, gathered photos, practiced and practiced some more, and, as promised, held what we believe to be one of our greatest successes during this disorienting time: celebrating the accomplishments of the academic year and our graduating class online. More than a hundred families logged on, some dressed for the occasion, some having had pre-celebratory dinners together. Honors graduates were recognized individually on the screen. We shared stories and highlights of our year together. The online chat started thirty minutes before the event, with music and a slide show running in the background, and ended more than forty minutes after the main event.

Throughout the summer, HCC honors hosted film nights every other week. The theme was "the history of horror films." The evenings were facilitated by an honors faculty member who dressed up based on the movie: one week he was in a virtual Frankenstein's lab dressed as a crazy scientist, the next he appeared (or didn't) onscreen as the Invisible Man. This faculty member engaged the students before and after the films and allowed for running comments through chat during the screening. HCC honors also held live online mandatory orientations for incoming students; hosted panel discussions with faculty, alumni, and students to discuss the social unrest that permeated the local and national news; and showcased virtual open houses and instant-decision days to recruit incoming students. Each member of the staff held open

office hours by logging into Zoom at regular times and meeting with either individual students or groups of students who could drop in collectively. Ironically, HCC honors enrollment was up more than 10% from the previous fall in spite of an enrollment drop of more than 20% throughout the college.

The decision was made early that all honors classes for the fall would migrate online and remain live, requiring students and faculty to meet at the same days and times as originally scheduled. When the decision was made, many students in the program had already registered for what was considered at the time to be a normal fall term. Migrating to online classes allowed faculty to prepare and students to make the choice whether to remain in the program. Only one honors faculty member was unable to meet the new requirements, and, surprisingly, our student enrollment grew.

The struggle for our students in the spring was reflected again in the fall. They had limited success, particularly in online asynchronous classes, where students had to work independently on their own schedule. Although not our first choice, online and live, or synchronous, was certainly the best choice for honors, allowing students to experience at least some consistency in the fall—regular meetings—and not have to worry about unexpected changes in the schedule.

Fall also brought with it a new understanding of and comfort with providing what was necessary to continue building community outside the classroom. We focused on social justice issues for our film nights and held seminars on politics. Students had craft challenges using only what they had at home; they would craft with zoom cameras on while listening to a favorite show or music as if they were in the same room. The honors student organization also set biweekly game nights and, for their final fall event, hosted an ugly sweater contest and holiday caroling event; using Teams, they called in various offices throughout the college to lip sync carols.

Staff held online workshops for résumé writing, transfer preparation, vision boarding, and scholarship applications. Colleges and universities visited virtually, recruiting students who would soon earn their AAs. The staff gained access to Time Trader, a link that allows students to automatically make appointments with anyone in the office, as needed, thus improving the access students had previously enjoyed by “dropping in” pre-COVID. Exclusively online, we felt empowered to do all we had done before with our students except travel.

Regardless of travel limitations, our international collaborations continued through the fall term. We met regularly with students from Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences to discuss the United Nations Global

Sustainability Challenges. Our honors humanities class continued its work through the U.S. State Department, solving sustainability challenges through collaborations with students in Jordan. The purchase of a virtual reality humanities tour, using leftover funds from the previous budget year, now allows “travel” in both honors and traditional classes with tours of European countries, enabling more students than ever to access a simulated international travel experience.

Johnson County Community College (JCCC)

JCCC’s experience echoes that of HCC: after an extended spring break, we offered honors courses online for the first time ever. These classes met synchronously at the same time they would have met in person and with all students in the virtual classroom at once. After overcoming technical issues and working with JCCC IT to ensure students could borrow laptops, webcams, and secure a WIFI connection, we realized that our pedagogy could adapt to the virtual environment more easily than we originally feared. We also learned that students could do well in their courses despite increased challenges.

Community building is always difficult, even when we can be physically in the same space, so doing it remotely was a real challenge. Our creative responses to COVID were fueled by an awareness that our students’ struggles with mental health would be exacerbated by social and physical distancing measures. Additional stressors—such as job loss, unavailable childcare, illness and sometimes even death of loved ones—made matters worse. We embraced the pillars of honors education and thought of innovative ways to support our students. We also modeled kindness and encouraged them to follow suit by taking part in our Kindness Challenge, which allowed us to record over two hundred acts of kindness by honors students, college staff, and faculty. Over the course of two weeks and with the promise of a \$100 bookstore gift card, submissions of photos or short narratives describing acts of kindness—flowers left on neighbors’ porches, cookies and cakes distributed, notes sent to loved ones—poured in.

We started by improving our communication to students. The director sent students personalized emails once a week, and we adapted the content of our weekly bulletin to include information about available scholarships, unemployment benefits, or mental health support. We also enhanced the use of our social media platforms. We adopted a themed strategy (Mindful Monday, Triumph Tuesday, Wellness Wednesday, Thankful Thursday, Just for

Fun Friday) that led our followers and “likes” to increase. Our community strengthened as we featured our students’ successes for Triumph Tuesday or gave them immediately usable and free tips on Wellness Wednesday. Our investment in social media followed the advice of our student employees, who suggested that this was the best avenue to draw in the eighteen- to twenty-year-old honors students. The positive response proved the advice correct.

We also ensured that our programming would be maintained through the end of the spring semester at JCCC. We maintained our student association’s biweekly meetings, our alumni Meet & Greets, and our Discover the World presentations, giving students a chance to share their unique experiences with each other and further foster community. Even so, we spent much of our time reassuring students, providing answers when we had them, directing them to financial support when possible, and connecting them with departments on campus that would provide what they needed, whether food, laptops/tablets, or mental health support. A survey of honors students at the end of the spring semester affirmed that the honors staff’s communication and availability, in addition to the synchronous honors courses, were a lifeline; they fostered normalcy in a fast-changing world and provided students with a sense of belonging. Given this experience, honors faculty were encouraged to offer their courses synchronously and to continue our other efforts in the fall.

We spent the summer gathering resources and ideas so that we could make the best of the new normal come fall. While faculty were on break, honors administrators spent that time in webinars and online conferences: they built new virtual events to enrich the fall calendar with programming geared toward community fostering. While all our spring efforts continued, we also added a weekly touchpoint, called the Honors Hangout, for students to come by and share their experience or meet peers, faculty, and administrators. Our most successful Hangout was the hour spent with the new president of the college in late October. Other Honors Hangouts, though slightly less popular, allowed students to introduce their pets and share mental health tips. Students also enjoyed learning from one of our English faculty how to use holiday cards to share kindness with loved ones.

Throughout the fall, honors at JCCC invested in our previous community efforts writ large: not only did we continue our outreach to students and maintain a rich calendar of events, but we also encouraged the involvement of honors faculty. Most faculty teaching honors courses were involved in a taskforce or committee contributing to the ongoing improvement of our practices. All honors faculty were invited to gather once a month to discuss a brief reading and share successful pedagogical experiments. Faculty experienced

these gatherings in the same way students did theirs: as a sense of belonging to a community that was real even though virtual.

While our asynchronous fall courses allowed our students not to fall behind, students did not enjoy them as much as our synchronous classes. Two stood out, however, for their ability to effectively foster a sense of community in honors: our honors seminars and our honors capstone. These courses have features in common that no doubt contributed to their effectiveness: they are taught in seminar style; they incorporate a number of reflection assignments and group projects; and they empower students to take ownership of their learning. When prompted, students reported that these classes were key to their wellbeing because they could express themselves freely and discuss COVID-induced challenges as well as racism and other inequities, all while being together in one (virtual) space.

CONCLUSION

Every crisis can become an opportunity. Though the challenges have been real, both institutions embraced them and encouraged their teams, faculty, and students to do the same. Not only did we foster existing programs and systems, but COVID allowed us to enhance our practices in a new normal that will likely persist, in many ways, in the aftermath of the pandemic.

“Normal” will certainly be redefined, but “community,” particularly in honors, remains the same. We stood strong together in both institutions to carry on whatever programming could be delivered online, postponing what had to be pushed back, such as travel. Content delivery methods changed, but, proudly, we made no concessions in the quality of education or degree of outreach to students.

During the holiday season nine months after our initial retreat to our homes, we had become accustomed to our online lives in ways we never imagined. We miss our face-to-face activities and classes, but happily the students and faculty have, in large part, made the most of the COVID experience. Spring 2021 will be more of the same, but we hope for a “normal” fall 2021 that implements some of our new best practices.

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