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Crossing the Ohio: Welcoming Students of Color into the Honors White Space

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Abstract: Honors has long been a space for pushing boundaries and promoting culturally responsive teaching, yet students from underserved and marginalized populations rarely see themselves reflected in the designated intelligentsia of most universities. This essay considers several aspects of boundaries in, and barriers to, the honors experience. Implicit in marketing honors as "value-added" is the boundary between the honors curriculum and the "regular" curriculum from which other boundaries extend. From outmoded enrollment management and admissions policies to curricular and instructional strategies that hold to a pedagogy of whiteness, the author urges honors educators to create paths to student academic success by cutting through barriers of privilege and power that threaten the continued participation of traditionally marginalized populations in honors.

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Christopher Keller ends his essay "'Mad and Educated, Primitive and Loyal': Comments on the Occupations of Honors" with a challenge: "When we move into and occupy new scholarly conversations as well as new social, cultural, and political domains, do we recognize how and when we are welcome and how and when we are, instead, simply welcoming ourselves?" This is not merely a rhetorical question. In September of 2020, the National Collegiate Honors Council went on record in support of inclusion in enrollment management, admissions policies, and retention policies as well as the

elimination of barriers to entrance and continued participation for members of traditionally marginalized populations in honors, many of them members of historically underserved minorities. The Task Force charged with articulating this vision asked itself a question similar to Keller's: "As organizations . . . advocate for the reexamination of test scores in a post-pandemic world, can honors colleges and programs serve as locations for experimentation in enrollment management? After all, honors has long been a space for pushing boundaries and being creative about the educational journey" (Badenhausen et al., 8).

The implicit promise to honors students of the twenty-first century represents a seismic shift from a set of admissions practices that have long been exclusive rather than inclusive, more exclusive than the admissions criteria of the institutions in which these programs are housed. Honors admissions has historically been competitive, and honors programs and colleges have struggled to find analytics that will accurately predict student success in honors, especially since glittering academic success at lower levels does not guarantee much of anything beyond the first semester of the first college year. Marketing honors as "value-added" necessitates erecting a boundary between the honors curriculum and the "regular" curriculum, so adding market value both at initial admission and at graduation has usually included limiting access to honors programs and colleges.

Higher education has lately been describing the struggle for inclusion as achieving a balance between "excellence" and "access," but this very dichotomy presupposes that college students who did not either achieve or benefit from "excellence" in their K–12 journey will be forced to climb a wall or swim across a river to gain access; when honors programs and colleges use test scores, high school grades, and class ranking to determine who will be granted asylum, we are—as Keller puts it—simply "welcoming ourselves." Honors must reimagine itself, as it has begun to do and as it has promised to do, to create a path to student academic success that does not automatically privilege those students who come to it from a privileged pre-college experience. Since barely half a century has passed since we desegrated our schools *de jure* and we have not yet done it *de facto*, colleges and universities are still primarily White Space. Until we can first own this truth and then work to change it, honors will still be occupied by the white middle class, and students of color will need to be persuaded to take the risk of relocating from safe space into this new and frightening neighborhood where few people look like them and the welcome that is being extended could still prove to be hollow

(Scott, 109ff). Honors programs seek diversity, but in truth we tend to practice assimilation.

In a seminal article published in January of 2015 in the journal *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, Yale University sociology professor Elijah Anderson labeled for us what he called "the white space" in America: affluent suburban neighborhoods, golf courses, cemeteries, Congress, and, as Martin Luther King, Jr., had pungently pointed out some years before, most churches on Sunday morning. King made this observation many times over the years. Here is one of the earliest, from a 1960 interview on *Meet the Press*: "I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hour, in Christian America."

Anderson defines "white space" as "settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present" and observes that "white people usually avoid black space, but black people are required to navigate the white space as a condition of their existence" (11). Anderson describes White Space this way:

> When present in the white space, blacks reflexively note the proportion of whites to blacks, or may look around for other blacks with whom to commune if not bond, and then may adjust their comfort level accordingly; when judging a setting as too white, they can feel uneasy and consider it to be informally 'off limits.' For whites, however, the same settings are generally regarded as unremarkable, or as normal, taken-for-granted reflections of civil society. (10)

Robin DiAngelo describes the same phenomenon in her runaway bestseller *White Fragility*:

> White people don't think of themselves as having a racial identity. They think their experience is universal and that the identity of groups and consequently of identity politics is particular to their subculture. We don't think of ourselves as a subculture and identify with things like nationality, not 'race.' (2)

It took me years to learn that many of my students did not feel safe with me simply because I was white. The power I already held over them as a professor was compounded by the fact that they were in my White Space even though I didn't see it as white space. I come from a three-generation family history of social and political activism. My parents worked tirelessly for civil rights from the 1930s through the 1970s. But that heritage did not allow me

to assume that my students would be unafraid of me just because my classroom looked like safe space from where I was standing. Culturally responsive teaching demands that we recognize that college classrooms in the United States have for centuries been White Space in which students of color and those from traditionally marginalized populations struggle to find themselves represented in course materials and in school faculties.

Students of color often see themselves as strangers in honors programs because they are strangers—strangers in a strange land, no less. Optics matter. Minority students will be more likely to see themselves as welcome if there are more of them, and that means we should make them welcome by reimagining ourselves with a longer table and a bigger tent. We need a philosophy of inclusion within programs that define themselves by exclusion and where retention standards are based on White Space success—usually measured by GPA.

Understandably, university faculty—most of them white—are reluctant to abandon curricular and instructional strategies based on the methodologies through which they built their own success as students—and then as scholars—in White Space. Hence comes the persistence—not only across the board but particularly in honors—of traditional pedagogies, course materials, and performance measures based on a literacy that was aggressively and systematically denied to the enslaved. If our attitudes and behaviors convinced students that they came to college through the front door rather than the kitchen, they might be more inclined to give honors education a chance. As teachers, we need to become conscious of our unconscious bias. Because I am white, I have a responsibility to own my own stereotypes and to act consciously in ways that do not confirm them. The stereotypes about me do not limit my access or force me into respectability politics, so if I am going to use my power for the greater good rather than just to exculpate myself, I need to be aware of and respectful of my ability to harm others through ignorance or disrespect or both. If we take the time to look in the mirror, perhaps it can be repurposed as a window that shows us how our students see us rather than how we see ourselves.

When I accepted my first job in 1972 at the University of Maryland—Eastern Shore, a historically black institution, my students there simply assumed that all their professors would be white. They did not expect to see professors who looked like them and classmates who looked like me. Honors students from underserved and marginalized populations rarely see themselves reflected in the designated intelligentsia of most universities. The paths and the pipelines have been blocked for a long time, and it will take a lot of

energy and time to grow into true diversity. In the meantime, the best we can do is eradicate the remaining structural racism built into our recruiting and admissions, our curricula, our retention systems, and our overarching vision that honors programs are here to serve students who were already White Space achievers before they came to us and who will seek graduate education almost immediately—hence our emphasis on training them as working scholars rather than as lifelong learners.

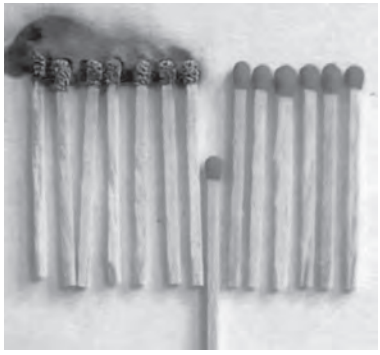
Part of the answer may lie not in trying to bring students from underperforming school systems up to speed but in moving away from deficit-based assignment design, such as academic essays, and moving toward asset-based assignment design. The first assignment shown in Figure 1 tests skills that go all the way back to ancient Greece and does not require that you know how to write a documented research essay in impeccable Standard English. The second assignment shows a classroom version of a real-life assignment that requires both critical and creative thinking, asking students to write something other than a five-paragraph essay and to write it in their own voice.

Risk-aversion and neophobia, as well as "white fragility," often impede faculty who belong to the majority culture from challenging the established European and colonial European canon in course materials, assignments, and assessments of student learning. Honors faculty may be especially reluctant to deviate from the canon because they see themselves as preparing their students to succeed in graduate study within that very canon. Furthermore, a toxic misperception persists—in and outside of honors—that students from marginalized and historically underrepresented populations need remediation to attain excellence. These students often share this belief, impeding their success.

At the University of Baltimore, where we serve a nontraditional student population that is widely diverse in age, ethnicity, and level of college preparation, we use problem-solving approaches and less orthodox teaching strategies, such as Difficult Encounters and Place as Text, along with artifact-based assignment design and assessment, enabling these students to experience immediate academic success while at the same time aligning their skills in conventional measures of academic prowess, such as logical reasoning and argumentative writing, with white middle-class standards. What many universities see as remediation, we see as working in the zone of proximal development until our students feel secure in the White Space, secure enough to feel confident they will be able to make the transition to the White Space world of White Space work (see Figure 2).

However, this track record of student success requires faculty to abandon the perception that students are like them but with deficits and instead to embrace a perception that students have their own assets which they can employ to demonstrate learning. Only then can faculty become less risk-averse about assigning only measures of learning on which they themselves excel. Faculty can also be taught to measure outstanding academic performance by

FIGURE 1. EXAMPLES OF ASSET-BASED ASSIGNMENT DESIGN



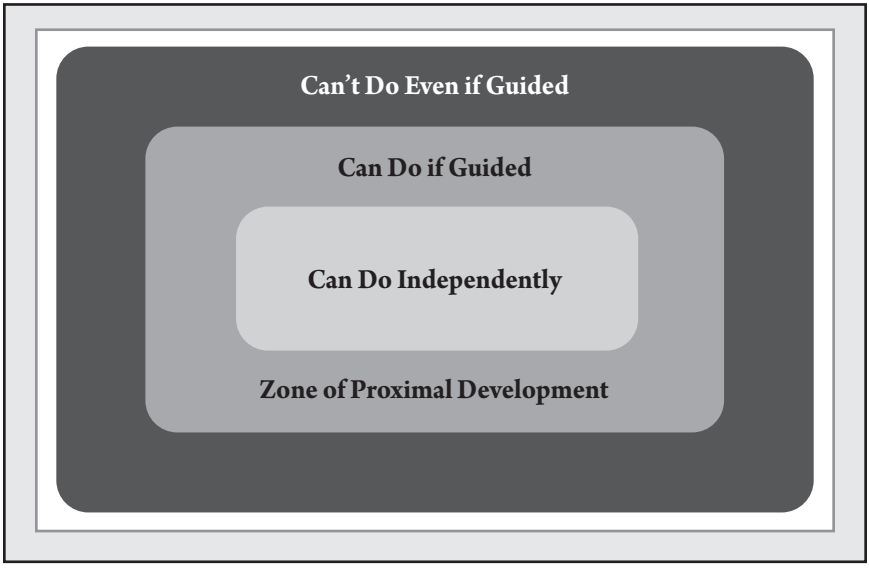
Collect arguments by analogy that are being used to attempt to explain COVID-19 to people who are unfamiliar with methods of disease prevention that predate the widespread use of contemporary pharmaceuticals. Analyze the arguments for accuracy. Indicate whether or not you think the analogy is sound and whether you find the argument persuasive. Will others be persuaded?

Write a therapeutic autobiography. This may be real or fictional. To go with it, create a musical autobiography, a visual autobiography, and a biopoem.

assigning artifacts other than research papers—original, real-world measures of learning. Once they realize that they can apply conventional measures of evaluating excellence even to unfamiliar artifacts—such as slideshows, videos, museum exhibits, posters, and proposals—faculty find them surprisingly easy to judge with confidence and comfort. If faculty are willing to take a deep dive into their own thinking and try venturing out of their comfort zone, even honors faculty may learn ways to create learning space that is not based on dominant-culture assumptions and into which all students may be safely welcomed and in which members of marginalized groups do not feel like strangers pressured into respectability politics just to be accepted, let alone respected.

In the summer of 2020, at the convergence of the three social crises noted by Keller, and just as he predicted, the Maryland Collegiate Honors Council decided that the theme of its February 2021 conference would be "*In Honors . . .* Black Lives Matter." In addition to issuing a call for student scholarship and undergraduate research, we asked for creative projects and memoirs. We asked students to come share their experiences with us. Our Student Engagement Team put together three Black Lives Matter panels comprising students from colleges across the state, and these were our plenaries. Our keynote presentation was a diverse panel of honors directors of color from across the state. The student panels addressed implicit bias in academia, in law enforcement, and in health care. The faculty members talked about their experiences with both

Figure 2. The Zone of Proximal Development



implicit and explicit bias, tokenism, discrimination, and social expectations. Everyone in the audience made it clear that we were there not to argue but to listen. The conference was transformative because everyone who attended was on the same footing, was there to learn, and was sufficiently comfortable to express frustrations and pains. One of honors' most permeable boundaries is that between faculty and students.

The real attraction of honors to students of color and others from marginalized groups is that they are empowered as young scholars in a learner-centric space, free to express academic doubt and personal anxiety; they will be free to engage with ideas and earn the respect of teachers they can challenge and free to challenge their teachers as well as their peers. To convince them to take the risk, honors faculty and students need to reach out to these students to "occupy" their "hearts and minds" and make them feel safe to come inside. It falls to our academic leaders in honors programs and colleges—faculty, staff, and students—to create honors cultures on our campuses that are truly hospitable and that welcome new ideas, new people, and learning without boundaries. When we have re-engineered honors from White Space into Community Space, when it is just Honors Space, then we will have honorably achieved inclusion.

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