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Traveling in Circles: Gatekeeping in Honors

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Abstract: This essay challenges boundaries in honors that are both intentional and unavoidable. Reflecting on what appears to be an overemphasis on boundaries and gatekeeping within honors, the author urges practitioners to consider its exclusionary culture and the extent to which it circles around its stated goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The current preoccupation of honors with reaching beyond its boundaries to embrace the goals of social justice movements, for example, reveals the extent of its entrenchment with concerns of Whiteness. This essay suggests that until honors practitioners are willing to do the difficult reflective work of understanding why boundaries in honors seem important, little can be achieved to move beyond them.

Keywords: learned institutions & societies; Whiteness; educational leadership; educational equalization; Minnesota State University, Mankato (MN)—Honors Program

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With not quite three years in the role of honors director, I am a relative newcomer to the honors community. Like many who travel to a new land, I have spent time observing my surroundings, trying to learn what I can about the norms and prevailing perspectives in this culture. After attending the NCHC conference several times, I have been struck by how much energy seems to be poured into the gatekeeping aspect of honors. Questions such as who is admitted to honors, who graduates with honors, and whether honors should serve campus broadly or only an elite few were the focus of many panels I attended. Asking “Who belongs in honors?” implies that some do not belong. The boundary is both intentional and unavoidable.

This notion of gatekeeping is also present in the questions presented by Keller in the lead essay for this Forum on the Boundaries of Honors. Keller is specifically asking us to consider the boundaries of our scholarship, whether our work in honors should remain focused inside the walls of honors or we are “free to let honors roam and occupy any territories we wish.” If we let ourselves roam, he wonders how this freedom might change honors and the places into which we roam. I needed to reread this essay and the call for forum submissions several times to make sure I was understanding the questions being asked. I kept coming back to one of the questions presented in the call for submissions: does honors have “any business impinging on social movements and issues outside its domain?” I struggled to grasp how we could have a meaningful discussion on this topic if there are leaders in this community who believe the answer is “no.” The question presupposes social movements that are outside the domain of honors. If such movements exist, then it is painfully clear whom the gatekeeping function of honors seeks to keep out. The most pressing social movements of this time undoubtedly address the needs of black and brown students. To suggest that these movements might be outside the domain of honors is one of the most blatant examples of white supremacy I have observed in this new culture in which I find myself.

When I announced my decision to take the role of honors program director at my university, some friends and colleagues chided me for moving into a role designed to serve the elite and most advantaged students on my campus, yet I chose the role because I had long admired our honors program as a place focused on student growth and development through high-impact engagement practices. The essence of honors to me is about using deep reflection to break down boundaries that block understanding of self and others. To gain cultural competence, students in our program are asked to engage in self-reflection on their own cultural biases and perspectives before seeking to understand those who see the world differently. Perhaps I was naïve when I embarked on my journey, but I was expecting to find the same quality of reflection within the broader honors community. I hoped to be exposed to meaningful pedagogies that embrace critical thinking and reflection, that seek to prepare students to move beyond narrow understandings of their own lived experiences. I did not expect to find so much focus on how to create isolated communities of learning. When attending my first NCHC conference, the idea of an honors-only building that contains both exclusive dormitory space and classrooms baffled me. These arrangements seem to elevate and protect a select few from the reality in which all live. I struggle to understand the point of honors if not to prepare students to engage in the world as it actually is.

As I continued to make sense of honors culture, I was pleased to find that the monograph *Occupy Honors Education* (2017) sought to address the problematic aspects of the gatekeeping function of honors. Contributors Dzieszinski et al. (2017) write,

Honors programs have an obligation to take a stand regarding social inequalities and are doing so whether they realize it or not. Programs that attempt to remain neutral, insisting that their curriculum and objectives are focused on helping all students achieve their highest academic potentials independent of any social bias or judgment, are missing the point. To the degree that programs do not actively challenge the social norms of privilege tied to honors, they are tacitly supporting the status quo that makes honors a privilege for the privileged. (pp. 84–85)

Several other contributors to this monograph speak to the concerns I was having about the exclusionary culture of honors. Their work makes a compelling argument that there is no neutral and that to continue trying to justify one reveals what is valued. The topic of this forum makes me fear that no one was listening to the arguments presented in the 2017 monograph. In 2021, we are still obsessed with the boundaries of honors.

Asking if honors has anything to offer the Black Lives Matter movement is evidence of how deeply Whiteness is woven into honors culture. To view such social movements as outside our academic boundaries is the essence of white supremacy at work in education. In their contribution to *Occupy Honors Education* (2017), Coleman issued the call that honors must embrace social justice as a core part of our mission. Keller's treatment of Coleman's stance is dismissive at best, yet well before the events of 2020, Coleman recognized the way the boundaries of honors were forcing us to travel in circles, never making meaningful change toward stated goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Patton and Haynes (2020) argue in their powerful piece "Dear White People: Reimagining Whiteness In the Struggle for Racial Equity," "Reimagining Whiteness requires seeing yourself as fully capable of responding to racial inequity and engaging other White people in this process as a non-negotiable imperative" (p. 42). The work is non-negotiable, yet honors is still deep in negotiations.

If I move beyond my confusion and frustration regarding why the questions presented in this forum are still being asked, I can find only one justification for why we might decide honors does not have any business influencing the world outside itself. Clearly, until we sort ourselves out and

stop moving in circles, we have the potential to do more harm if we attempt to influence beyond the borders we established. If members of this community are still questioning why issues of social justice are relevant to honors education, then, by all means, do not cross the boundary but rather sit inside the protective walls constructed and consider why it is so comfortable in there.

Until we are willing to do the difficult reflective work of unpacking why boundaries in honors seem important, we can offer little beyond our borders. If the honors community continues to obsess over the caretaking and gate-keeping of boundaries, all the conference sessions, monographs, and forums on equity and inclusion are nothing more than what Saad (2020) calls “optical allyship,” or the kind of efforts that lack any real intent to dismantle systems of oppression. We must stop theorizing about the appropriateness of boundaries and begin removing them.

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