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Honors in the Post-Pandemic World: Situation Perilous

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Abstract: The COVID pandemic has exacerbated structural, demographic, and financial challenges faced by American higher education institutions and their honors programs and colleges. Likewise, the Black Lives Matter movement has made plain the inequities in the higher education sector. The new “normal” post-COVID will challenge honors practitioners to address these inequities in a landscape of even greater competition for even scarcer resources. Doubling down on the core values of honors, such as diversity, community, student agency, and inclusive excellence, will help programs define and articulate their worth in this new environment. This essay presents ways in which the communicative and collaborative technologies that helped sustain higher education during the coronavirus crisis can be marshaled to enhance intra- and inter-institutional collaborations in teaching, learning, and research to benefit students and faculty alike.

Keywords: COVID pandemic—teaching and learning; cooperative research; teaching models; educational equalization; University of Maine (ME)–Honors College

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Writing in late winter of 2021, I share my colleagues’—indeed, the whole world’s—desire to get back to normal. On the horizon, the administration of the COVID vaccines on a mass scale promises a first step in the return to normalcy, but what will that new “normal” be for all of us—students, faculty, and administrators alike—in the emerging landscape of higher education? The pandemic has exacerbated structural, demographic, and financial challenges facing all but the most elite institutions. The pandemic response and the Black Lives Matter movement have both made plain the

stark inequalities facing people of color and other marginalized communities across all sectors of society, including higher education. While many of the adaptations to the COVID crisis may prove durable and useful, others may persist due simply to financial exigency. I posit that the post-pandemic era will be full of perils for honors: thriving or merely surviving will depend on being clear about the values of honors and its value-proposition for college students, for faculty, and for their institutions.

FUNDAMENTAL VALUES OF HONORS

At its core, honors is a *community of opportunity*. By this I mean that it brings together a diverse body of motivated students and innovative faculty to create an environment in which students are challenged to take initiative and develop agency. They are also asked to reflect on their own education and on the ethical and societal contexts in which their disciplines and communities of practice are immersed. In this way, honors deliberately moves students beyond training for a career based on a major and toward a broader interdisciplinary perspective.

This development of students' agency starts with academics: capping class sizes allows for more interaction among students and with the instructor in the academic setting. Many honors students report that their honors seminar is the only course in the first semester, or first year, in which they can get to know every member of the class by their first name. A measure of the interaction between students and instructor is the number of reference letters that honors faculty are called on to write for their students seeking internships, fellowships, and other opportunities even though the faculty member may have no connection to the student's major field of study. From the first-year seminar to learning communities to undergraduate research and the thesis/capstone, honors programs typically engage students in all or nearly all of George Kuh's ten high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008).

In both curricular and extracurricular settings, honors students are also encouraged to take on service projects and engage with the larger institution and the community beyond. At the University of Maine (UMaine), for example, our successful Research Collaborative (RC) model has been designed to combine interdisciplinary team building with high-impact research informed by community stakeholders using a knowledge-to-action model (Amar et al., 2016; Silka, 2010; Clark & Dickson, 2003). This approach allows students to broaden their perspective on their major and in some cases leads them to new paths that fit their emerging priorities and sense of self. In many cases, the

projects taken up by students in an RC form the basis for their honors thesis/capstone work.

CHALLENGES

The COVID pandemic has affected every component of the student experience in honors, starting with recruiting and admitting/inviting an entering first-year class and then on-boarding those students and helping them develop an academic and social community. The pandemic has curtailed upper-level students' plans for experiential and community-engaged learning and has barred them from traveling to conferences or from study abroad. Finally, thesis research or other capstone projects have been severely affected by restrictions in access to laboratories, libraries, and community settings. Adding insult to injury, student graduates in 2020 and 2021 were not, by and large, able to celebrate their achievements collectively with their families and classmates.

In spring and summer of 2020, safety concerns forced most recruiting and orientation events online while, at the same time, the Black Lives Matter movement brought new urgency to addressing how admissions practices reinforce structural inequality in higher education. Honors programs and colleges have a special responsibility in this endeavor as they are generally more selective than their home institutions. This past fall, NCHC issued a task force report on "Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory and Practice of Inclusion" (Badenhausen et al., 2021) that contains recommendations for practices that can enhance diversity and inclusion in the honors population. Evaluating how to implement these recommendations will be essential over the next few years. Likewise, we must ascertain that these changes result in measurable improvements in access to honors education for students of color and those from marginalized groups.

For rising high school seniors, access to standardized testing was curtailed during the pandemic, and many colleges and universities made test scores optional to level the admissions playing field. It is not clear how effective this strategy has been: early reports on shifts in numbers of applications at Ivy League versus less elite institutions suggest that the generalized removal of national test scores from applications has advantaged the more elite institutions (Nierenberg, 2021). Since many public universities and smaller colleges are heavily tuition-dependent, significant drops in numbers of applications could strongly affect institutional viability and endanger the honors programs that they host.

One of the big challenges for honors during the pandemic has been creating community while losing a sense of place. The close connections between students, along with the ability to drop into a faculty office or honors lounge or study space, have been lost. Online group meetings via Zoom or Google chat provide a substitute, but they are a pale imitation of the original. Despite our Zoom fatigue, though, our online access has been a boon for most of us: without these online tools, many (more) higher education faculty would likely have been laid off or furloughed. Only time will tell if a certain few will emerge, like Isaac Newton from his quarantine year of 1665, with revolutionary ideas that can change the world (Ott, 2020).

Honors budget shortfalls in late 2020 and in 2021 were mitigated somewhat by the ability to shift funds set aside for travel or community events to pay for new technology or simply to fund the deficit. To the extent that some of those shifted dollars are not coming back because of reduced enrollment or continued higher costs in other arenas, honors may face an ongoing problem with funds for the programming that builds community and encourages engagement with larger societal issues. Many challenges of the post-pandemic era will be tied to a scarcity of resources in higher education, and honors programs/colleges will need to balance the resource needs of honors curricula and extracurricular activities with the opportunity cost of failing to maintain thriving honors programs.

Honors education requires initiatives such as UMaine's RC, but they necessitate resources in the form of faculty time, funds for student work, travel expenses, stakeholder/participant costs, and costs of materials and supplies for research, so we will need to be creative. In the tradition of honors-as-laboratory-for-innovation, we co-designed a request for proposals titled "Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research Collaboratives" with the Office of the Vice-President for Research; that office then provided seed funding for five projects that were implemented by undergraduate teams with guidance from several faculty and other stakeholders. Such innovations and collaborations will be important to the future of honors in times of financial duress.

Like most honors educators, I view honors as a community of students and faculty who are in it together. In remote and hybrid classes, even small seminars, many students have trouble staying engaged. The interaction between students is artificial compared to in-person instruction, and technology glitches are common enough to render any given class problematic. At the same time, faculty—in addition to teaching the class—are being asked to backstop students in many ways that are related to emotional and mental

well-being. Faculty burnout is more likely in this situation, further disrupting the sense of a community that connects students not only to each other but to their teachers.

The central questions for honors educators are 1) how we can adapt to whatever new normal confronts us and potentially devalues the core principles of honors and 2) how much agency we will have to define the new normal in collaboration with our students. I am somewhat pessimistic. Financial pressures will push higher education to become more “efficient,” with larger classes, fewer opportunities to enrich our students’ experiences, and less funding for research- and conference-related travel. Unless significant changes are made to the funding formulas for public institutions in particular, many students will seek the most efficient route to a degree or credential and eschew the extra work of honors no matter how beneficial it may be to their long-term career and personal goals.

LESSONS LEARNED

A bright spot for me lies in identifying and responding to salutary aspects of the new tools and work habits occasioned by the pandemic, which we can use to double down on the core principles and promote them ever more strongly outside the boundaries of honors. The same tools that have allowed higher education to survive the pandemic offer some new opportunities for collaboration. Our ability to adapt and retain agency will rely on more collaboration, not less. In some sense, distance has been erased and our big worry in using these tools is dealing with time—making sure that participants from different time zones can all meet synchronously. I outline three such opportunities below.

As the pandemic restrictions set in during March of 2020, I was able to observe the way teams of students and faculty used Zoom and other online communications to keep high-impact research projects moving forward even though each member of the team was in a different location. For example, the Servant Heart RC in honors at UMaine, in which I participate, works on educational projects in Sierra Leone and leveraged the increased familiarity with tools like Zoom and WhatsApp to engage in more real-time conversations with our Sierra Leonean partners than had occurred prior to COVID restrictions. Students were also afforded consistent leadership practice within teams (Amar et al., 2020). The increased comfort with online meetings and remote collaboration will allow for more flexible definition of partnerships and collaboration at a distance and across state and national boundaries.

Remote collaboration has also allowed folks who might not be able to attend a traditional in-person meeting at a given location to participate fully in committee work and board meetings of various kinds. I see a real benefit to continuing to use these tools to promote collaborations between honors programs and, in particular, to further articulation agreements between two- and four-year schools, communication between rural and urban schools, international collaborations, and collaborative research experiences for undergraduates from institutions with different resources and diverse student bodies.

One kind of collaboration that interests me is offering joint courses and curricula across different institutional and geographical contexts, or what I call “contrasting cases pedagogy.” Dan Schwartz and his colleagues find (in a physics learning context) that when students are asked to invent concepts within an environment that highlights “contrasting cases,” there is better learning and knowledge transfer (Schwartz et al., 2011). I suggest that as students from different environments reflect on wicked problems like the food system or climate change, salient differences between contexts will help them make distinctions and reflect more deeply on what they take for granted in their own environment. For example, an interinstitutional course can use our new technologies to allow teams to explore the impacts of climate change in Maine and Utah, for instance, as a means to broaden student perspectives in both geographical contexts.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic’s disruptions of higher education and of honors have been profound. If the national response to the economic crisis includes adequate help for education via national and state aid to public institutions as well as help for students to minimize debt, my pessimism with respect to resources may be unwarranted. The way forward for honors, in my view, is to continue to articulate and to act on our core values, most notably those of diversity, equity, and inclusion, by enhancing collaborations within and across our institutions.

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