

“We Advocate a Semi-Revolution”: An Honors Conference Undergoes Transformation

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Abstract: Since the 1980s, the Maryland Collegiate Honors Council has offered an annual conference on a host campus in late February. In 2020, MCHC slipped in the conference just before the apocalyptic arrival of COVID-19 in March. Because this conference is hugely popular statewide, we decided to organize it virtually in 2021. Our topic—*In Honors...Black Lives Matter*—was too important for us to wait out the pandemic. We charged nothing, partly to encourage students and member institutions to participate and partly because it cost us nothing. Attendance tripled. Students who could not miss class or work were able to attend. Programs were spared from spending precious resources on travel and lodging. Family members were able to attend. Diversity followed access because students could attend at no cost on their phones. By necessity, our 2022 conference was also virtual. For 2023, we went hybrid with Friday in person and Saturday virtual. Students chose the day they preferred to present. They split evenly. This model reduced the conference cost to \$80 for both days and \$30 for virtual only, cut our carbon footprint, eliminated waste, removed time and transportation barriers for students, democratized participation, made cancellation unnecessary, and reduced the financial barrier for smaller honors programs. A student who was homeless even attended from his state-funded hotel room. This revolutionary experiment in public access to honors models the “NCHC Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education,” particularly as regards equity and inclusion. Moreover, this model is one that other jurisdictions could emulate, regardless of size.

Keywords: hybrid; access; inclusion; diversity; conference

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I advocate a semi-revolution.
The trouble with a total revolution
(Ask any reputable Rosicrucian)
Is that it brings the same class up on top.
Executives of skillful execution
Will therefore plan to go halfway and stop.
Yes, revolutions are the only salves,
But they're one thing that should be done by halves.

—Robert Frost, "A Semi-Revolution"

If we are honest with ourselves, most of us dislike change. The same can be said for institutions and organizations. Yet, innovation is one of the hallmarks of honors learning. We applaud our students who come up with new data, a fresh perspective, or challenging interpretations. Yet, how often do we engage in introspection about our programs, conferences, and other means of supporting honors learning? The COVID-19 pandemic provided such an opportunity. It prompted the Maryland Collegiate Honors Council (MCHC) to experiment radically with its annual conference. Yes, it was initially out of desperation, but then we realized there was an unexpected result, something good amid chaos and the unknown. Our story is a semi-revolution, keeping part of the old and the new, forming a hybrid annual conference that, we believe, can work elsewhere.

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

Since the early 1980s, MCHC has held a robust and popular statewide conference annually. Every spring, a member campus hosts all the honors programs in the state, from both public and private institutions, for a day of student and faculty presentations, nuts-and-bolts workshops, socializing, networking, City as Text™, a plenary event or two, and the presentation of the Portz awards for Outstanding Honors Students in Maryland at two-year and four-year colleges and universities. The conference began as a one-day marathon on a Friday but was eventually flexed to begin around noon on Friday to accommodate travel from institutions as far as six hours away and to leave space before dinner for the host institution to offer experiential learning opportunities at sites close to its campus. These have included Underground Railroad hubs in Cumberland and Harford, the Historic St. Mary's City archaeological dig, black bear habitats in Frostburg, the Carroll Creek Linear Park flood control project in Frederick, as well as Fort

McHenry, the National Aquarium, the American Visionary Art Museum, and the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture in Baltimore. The move to a two-day conference, with its overnight option for participants who did not live within easy driving distance, allowed more time for social and networking events on Friday evening and enabled students to choose whether to present on Friday or Saturday. Allowing participants a voice in the scheduling has helped accommodate conflicts with classes, work, or family events. It has also allowed greater participation by nontraditional students and those from traditionally marginalized populations, who can seldom attend the regional and national conferences because the cost and the extended time away from jobs and families are prohibitive for them.

The MCHC conference rotates annually between central locations in the state such as Baltimore and suburban Washington and far-flung locations such as Allegany County in the mountains and Worcester and Somerset Counties on the Eastern Shore, which borders both Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. A strong system of community colleges and University System of Maryland institutions across the state, all with honors programs, allows MCHC to offer students an opportunity to visit colleges and universities throughout Maryland as they consider transfer and graduate school opportunities that would be affordable and would keep them in Maryland. A recent feature of the conference is its Speed Dating sessions, where students can meet with all the honors directors attending the conference at one place at one time as they weigh their options for future study.

Year after year, the students and faculty who attend this conference report that it is transformative. The student panels and presentations are organized into topical sessions in which students who are about to graduate from selective private colleges such as Hood, McDaniel, and Notre Dame of Maryland present together with students in their first year at local community colleges, and we learn every year from the conference evaluations that, without a program, it would be impossible to tell from the quality of the undergraduate research being presented which students are the beneficiaries of the expensive private education. Students from less-privileged programs are empowered by this experience. Fueled by the level of excellence expected at their home institutions and confirmed by their experience at the conference that they are not academic “imposters,” honors students from Maryland community colleges feel ready to compete for national scholarships such as Jack Kent Cooke and to seek transfer to elite institutions. Honors students from University System of Maryland

institutions other than the University of Maryland at College Park, including our state's four HBCUs, often see themselves for the first time on equal footing with those admitted to the flagship as first-year candidates and start to think about applying to first-tier graduate programs with their honors projects as portfolio pieces.

Students from the more selective private colleges are changed in a different way. Often for the first time, they find themselves in an academic environment with academic high achievers who are not like them: single mothers, veterans, working professionals like police officers returning to college to supplement their on-the-job experience with formal education, and late bloomers of all kinds whose path to a college degree has been diverted by illness, demands from family, or mental health issues such as mood disorders, addiction, finances, or homelessness. Our Creative Arts sessions often draw stunning memoirs from these students who are finding their voices in honors. One of our most powerful student plenary panels ever came from students from the Community College of Baltimore—Dundalk: “You’re Not Alone: How One Honors Class Comforted Families Impacted by Addiction,” which was picked up and covered by one of the local television stations: wmar2news.com/news/conquering-addiction/youre-not-alone-ccbc-students-share-stories-of-family-addiction.

Not only was this a topic of compelling public and academic interest in itself, but it brought everyone in the audience into an intimate space that mirrored the space somewhere in the private world of their own families, whatever their major, their GPA, their zip code, or the prestige of their college. Honors students who were going to college in sheltered post-adolescent enclaves were privileged to learn from honors students whose path to academic achievement, as Langston Hughes (1995, p. 30) suggested, “ain’t been no crystal stair.” In a Q&A that lasted an hour, they shared their own stories of the personal and psychic costs of living one’s teen years to qualify for honors admission to an elite institution such as Johns Hopkins, to not disappoint one’s family, or to justify to parents the cost of sending one to Maryland from Peru to go to college. Almost all the students from the four-year schools put on their conference evaluations that this experience could simply not have taken place at their own institutions. Although they could have asked Dundalk’s students to bring in their panel for a guest appearance, they could not reproduce the range of personal history and experience represented by the diverse listening audience.

Every year in their conference evaluations, students report that they see lasting value in the opportunity to meet and learn from honors students

from institutions other than their own. Through the conference, they learn that, despite their socioeconomic and cultural differences, honors students are profoundly alike across the spectrum because of the intellectual curiosity and intrinsic drive they share. They also learn that dissimilarities in their home institutions tend to mask deep, personal commonalities such as perfectionism, anxiety, and self-doubt. In their evaluations of the 2020 conference, participants reported overwhelmingly high satisfaction levels and had very few suggestions for improvement:

- Have coffee available all day long so we don't have to go out to Starbucks in the afternoon and miss something.
- Have a second vegetarian option at lunch.
- Make more conversation pods in the common areas so people can talk between presentations.
- Space out the breaks between sessions to allow more time for conversation.

The MCHC Executive Board was well aware when it created that conference, *Leadership in a Time of Change*, and scheduled it for February 28-29, 2020, that they would be holding it immediately before the critical Super Tuesday primaries. The MCHC president's closing message acknowledged the tense political climate in the country and challenged students to "be the change they wished to be in the world" over the coming months. Little did anyone realize, however, that within two weeks all of America's colleges and universities would shut down for spring break and would not reopen for the better part of two years, challenging the honors world to respond (Amar, 2021; Miller, 2021; Yarrison, 2021). Morgan State University had handed out hand sanitizer in its recruiting table swag bags. That was prescient. The pandemic changed the MCHC conference forever.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE PANDEMIC

The MCHC conference has been rescheduled only twice in its long history. In September 2003, Hurricane Isabel swept through Maryland and forced MCHC to cancel a conference that featured a tour and tasting at the Maryland Wine Festival and a plenary on wine and culture from a buffet of disciplines: economics, anthropology, biochemistry, music, agriculture, literature, health, psychology, art, and history. In March of 2015, the conference was snowed out—not in mountainous Frostburg, where the weather

is always a concern, but in beach-adjacent Salisbury, where they got only a dusting that had melted by 10 a.m. Sadly, the president had already closed Salisbury University on the basis of a dire forecast, so the buildings were not available. Both times, students and faculty throughout the state were truly disappointed.

Knowing this history and how deeply the conference was valued by its constituency, the MCHC Executive Board struggled for months, trying to decide whether to skip the conference in 2021 or to endeavor to produce a virtual facsimile when there was no place to hold it. Masking requirements in Maryland prohibited large in-person gatherings, the honors programs throughout the state were in a coma, and vaccinations were brand new and available only to the elderly and those with chronic illnesses. Zoom was still new and awkward and unfamiliar and not every institution in Maryland was using it. The logistical difficulties seemed insurmountable.

In the end, the Board decided to give a virtual conference a try. Honors directors told us that their students were hungry for some semblance of normalcy and concerned about the loss of academic opportunities after an entire year of sheltering at home in relative isolation. They wanted networking opportunities. They wanted to initiate relationships with faculty and students at their future academic homes. They wanted to present their research to other human beings. They wanted us to give out the conference prizes, especially the Portz awards. Above all, they wanted real-time interaction with other honors students, conversations on difficult topics, the opportunity to make friends, and the opportunity to learn about a galaxy of cutting-edge topics. They wanted the emotional lift the conference always gives them. We decided that some semblance of the conference would be better than no conference at all, and we plunged ahead into a virtual unknown.

On February 24 and 25, 2021, MCHC held its first fully virtual conference, *In Honors...Black Lives Matter* (mdhonorscouncil.weebly.com/2021-conference.html). The death of George Floyd in May of 2020 made it an easy choice to devote this conference to recognizing minority voices in honors and to the importance of the new NCHC pillar of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. The exceptional diversity in Maryland's honors programs statewide is largely a historical accident of population and geographical landscape, but our attention at this time to the gift of diversity in honors was entirely purposeful. After a year of experience with virtual conferences and events, we were mindful of the need to make this conference so meaningful as to defy the limits of the technology and maximize its advantages. We needed to give flat-screen sessions a third dimension of

emotional authenticity that would enable the speakers to engage the hearts as well as the minds of their audiences. It also seemed likely that difficult conversations might be easier to handle in this format, in which participants could quietly opt out or hide their faces if they needed privacy. Hence, we launched the conference this way: “This is a conference about scholarship and about storytelling. Every year, we learn here that these are actually the same thing. But this year we are highlighting the storytelling with which all scholarship begins.”

Three of Maryland’s honors directors of color set the tone by telling their own stories in the opening plenary: “I Can’t Teach’: Scholars of Color Reflect on Talking about Race in the Age of *Black Lives Matter*” (Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Towson University; Bryn Upton, McDaniel College; Darryl L. Peterkin, Morgan State University). In addition to the sessions devoted to academic presentations, student members of the Executive Board scheduled three student panels on implicit bias that included representatives from two-year and four-year schools, both public and private, across the state, ranging in age from 18 to 42 and different in many other respects as well. These panelists shared their own stories about implicit bias in academia, the rush to judgment in society at large, and the effects of implicit bias on mental and physical health. (By the time the conference took place, it had become clear that the pandemic was having a disproportionately heavy impact on citizens of color, especially those living in poverty.) The response to these panels was so enthusiastic that we have now included a “BIPOC in Honors” (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) plenary at every conference.

In planning our first virtual conference, we also tried to keep our ambitions modest, knowing that we were operating in a culture of neophobia. We decided early on to do what could be done respectfully in a virtual environment and to make no attempt to do anything that would work only in person. We made no attempt to provide a substitute for the experiential learning experience since the conference was taking place in cyberspace rather than on a college campus. The poster session was also omitted because an electronic poster is just a one-slide presentation; posters that are presented online must still be shown and discussed one at a time. We considered creating a breakout room for each poster and letting participants cruise from room to room just as they cruise from poster to poster in person but decided it would be too cumbersome and instead offered the students an option of a shorter presentation in lieu of a poster (4-5 slides rather than 12-15). To allow for the extra time it would take to present the posters consecutively rather than simultaneously, we started the

conference at 9:30 a.m. on Friday rather than the customary 12:30, since no one needed travel time to make it to the conference site by noon.

We ran the conference through an institution that was still fully online in 2021 and had figured out how to offer its entire curriculum, including the law school classes, virtually. We did not use outside speakers, which minimized logistical complexity, but we provided all the conference content ourselves. The 2020 conference had had a plenary by a scholar-in-residence at the host school, an anthropologist who was running college/community partnerships connected to the farm-to-food supply chain ([195business.com/articles/content/hcc-scholar-in-residence-program-gathers-resources-to-build-cohesive-food-community-738](https://www.195business.com/articles/content/hcc-scholar-in-residence-program-gathers-resources-to-build-cohesive-food-community-738)). She brought with her a local farmer who was putting his MBA to use doing sustainable farming on his family farm and making an economic success of it thanks to the internet. The students who had spent their entire lives in Maryland cities were fascinated at the convergence of disciplines—agriculture, economics, sociology, communication, web design. We could not reproduce that nexus, so we did not try.

One advantage that we should have anticipated was that no one stood at a podium and read a paper out loud to the audience. The students on the MCHC Board created a student engagement team that ran several pre-conference Zoom meetings in which they worked with their fellow students to help them learn how to present in a Zoom environment. We decided not to record the conference as we felt it would set a bad precedent when we returned to an in-person format if people could simply attend the conference without being physically present to provide a live audience for the presenters. Finally, we decided not to charge for the conference because the only actual cost to us was for meals. The tech support staff from the host institutions was free because they work on Fridays and Saturdays anyway, and there were no printing costs because all the conference materials were digital.

To our astonishment, the conference was an unqualified success. Between February 2020 and February 2021, Zoom had improved enormously, and both faculty and students had gotten used to it. We ran the entire conference as a giant single class with the concurrent sessions in breakout rooms and the main classroom as a conversation pit for participants to use before and between sessions. Student and faculty moderators managed the breakout rooms. Our staffer from technology services proved deft at assigning people to the right breakout rooms if they could not figure out how to do it themselves, and we kept Board members in the main room all day to answer questions and facilitate conversations.

The electronic sessions went very smoothly. After a year of going to school on Zoom, everyone had learned how to share screens, embed links, and remember to enable the sound. Because they were uploading their presentations from their own computers, they did not have to worry about whether their presentation would come up on the computer in a classroom at a strange college, or whether it would allow them to access the internet without a local username, or whether there would be a cable or a dongle that they could use to connect their own laptop to the projector. Just in case of emergencies, we asked them to upload a copy of their presentation in a OneDrive folder that we created so that the tech staff could access it and load it for them if necessary. This enabled the Board to review all the presentations in advance of the conference in order to select the award winners. We always give an award for the best poster at the conference but had never before been able to give an award for the best presentation because live presentations are ephemeral and no board member can attend all of them, since so many are concurrent. (Speed Dating worked fine in breakout rooms.)

Most astonishing of all was the attendance, particularly at a conference that everyone expected to be a vapid imitation of the real thing. Two hundred and thirty people registered for the conference, an increase of 150% from 2020, and well over 300 attended once participants shared the links with friends, family, and significant others who wanted to hear them speak. Students who could not miss class or work to drive to a site an hour away were able to attend and present. Programs did not have to spend precious honors program resources on travel or hotel rooms. Diversity followed access because students could attend at no cost, and they could do it on their phones. There was no drop in attendance on the second day. People who attended on Friday came back on Saturday for more. They came not only to their own sessions but to other people's, both for information and for the experience. Between sessions, they congregated in the main room to discuss what they had learned and raise new questions as well as make suggestions for future conferences. They were fully engaged in the entire conference experience. At the end of the second day, they told us in person and in the evaluations not to start at 9 a.m. again because by the end of the first day they were too emotionally exhausted to stick around for the awards presentation without the incentive of dinner and felt bad about not supporting their fellow students whose work was being honored. Despite rave reviews, they also said firmly in their evaluations that they wanted it back in person in 2022 because everything that had been wonderful in the virtual environment would be that much more wonderful in person.

As it turned out, our 2022 conference, *Honors in the Digital Age* (mdhonorscouncil.weebly.com/2022-conference.html), was also fully virtual. No campus was yet open or willing to host a large group because that would require proof of vaccination, masking, and social distancing under Maryland law. This time, we directly addressed the issue of how to do honors in virtual environments and carried over the previous year's theme of minority students in honors. We were unsure whether the huge increase in attendance had been because of the conference theme, the hunger for human interaction on academic topics, the need to share with like-minded people in a time of great national stress, or our accessibility and low cost. Hedging our bets, we repeated the panels in which students had shared their honors experience but expanded them from just African-American students to all students with an emphasis on honors and mental health: imposter syndrome, ADD, anxiety, and perfectionism. That year's opening plenary, "Why Is Honors So White?" featured a panel composed of half faculty and half students, both traditional and non-traditional. We inserted a Happy Hour directly before the plenary to encourage participants to come early and mingle during the time in which we would have served dinner in person. Saturday's plenary once again introduced a difficult conversation:

Finding Justice: Celebrating Truth and Reconciliation in Maryland. Faculty will share an innovative teaching strategy used to introduce students to the history of lynching and wrongful conviction in Maryland. By incorporating undergraduate research, courageous conversations, faculty and library mentors, and field experts, students tell the stories of the victims of racism, classism and reflect on their legacies.

Our second student panel, "Honors the Hard Way: Our Students Tell Their Stories," followed the former panel directly and led to a request from the students who attended that the 2023 conference be titled *Our Students Tell Their Stories*. That session was the highest rated of the conference; clearly, it filled a void left by the absence of social and networking events at which students had been able to meet one another. In some ways, it was even better because it permitted a level of honest intimacy that is not possible in casual conversation during session breaks and allowed students who spoke up, both panelists and audience, to reach everyone at once. After this session, students flocked to volunteer to join the student engagement team and the Executive Board so that they could help publicize the success of this conference through social media and plan the 2023 conference.

Like NCHC, MCHC has student leadership at every level, including the MCHC Board. This conference was so successful that we had graduating seniors who wanted to stay engaged in the community; thus, we created alumni reps to the Executive Board. They manage all our social media, since students tend to rotate through leadership as they graduate and move out of honors or away from it. The Facebook and Instagram pages enable us to keep our membership roster up-to-date as honors students change schools or finish and honors directors rotate in and out as well.

Ultimately, attendance at this conference was 126, exactly the same number of registered participants as recorded at the last in-person conference in 2020. In a year in which we were not doing Black Lives Matter, we logged the same number of attendees as before the pandemic. Consequently, we faced a new decision: return to a fully in-person event or try to save the advantages of the virtual format by holding the conference partly in cyberspace.

THE SEMI-REVOLUTION

What, exactly, were the advantages of the virtual format? No one disagrees that in-person conferences are more electric, warmer, and more vivid. But at what cost? Those experiences are increasingly becoming accessible only to the wealthy—and honors programs are not typically wealthy. Their budgets are often tiny and restricted relative to the need and the amount of work, and they frequently depend on fundraising to make up the shortfall—partially but never completely. The cost of the national conference puts it out of reach for many programs. Even institutional membership may be too costly, especially for new programs. MCHC has always been able to keep the cost of our conference under \$100 per person by holding it on college campuses. We want the conference to be self-supporting but do not expect to make a profit. The membership dues pay for the website and the awards, and the institutions at which the Board members work generally absorb the office expenses. The biggest expenses to institutions that attend are travel and overnight lodging for students if that is needed.

We have been struggling for years to find ways to reduce the expenses of the conference because we are well aware that cost affects access for the institutions that are doing honors on a shoestring. Getting students to come who are not presenting can be hard because often the institution will not pay for them, although the value of the conference is what participants draw from it by attending and not what they contribute to it by sharing their work. We move the conference around the state to make it local for someone

every two or three years and centrally locate it every other year. (It is a solid six hours to Frostburg from the University of Maryland—Eastern Shore or from St. Mary’s on the Western Shore.) Montgomery College has to rent a bus to transport its students if it wants to subsidize their travel. Issues with university liability govern whether or not an honors director can use a university vehicle and often preclude using one’s own to transport students. One year, when the conference was in Frostburg, the honors director at Frederick Community College could not come because *his* campus was closed due to the weather, although Frostburg was open and the conference was on. Often the only solution is what one honors director called “field trip by flash mob,” where students are simply asked to show up at the conference under their own steam. That works fine for adult students and those who live at home but not for students who live on campus and do not own cars.

Lodging is also a problem. These are not students who can be packed into a hotel four to a room as if they were vacationing in Florida on spring break. Efforts to get students at the host institution to host them did not work either; most did not have extra beds, and it is not Zoomer culture to share beds or sleep on the floor, no matter how strapped for funds their honors programs may be. Rather than bill their honors programs or pay themselves to stay over, students and faculty would just come for Friday or Saturday, but not both, and miss much of the conference immersion experience. Even worse, they would make decisions based on their experience at other conferences and just come to give their presentation and leave, without recognizing that the greatest value of the conference is coming together as an honors community. Because participants have to pay full price to attend and our registration fee simply covers the cost of meals, we wasted food, especially on Saturday when they would eat breakfast at the hotel or stop by Starbuck’s on the way over and leave before lunch because the presentations were finished and all that remained was the business meeting. The only time in recent years that we have held onto everyone through a sit-down buffet lunch was when our lunch speaker was honors program graduate and now University of Baltimore Professor D. Watkins (d-watkins.com/about), a best-selling author whose memoir, *The Cook Up: A Crack Rock Memoir*, was on the *New York Times* best-seller list at the time. Students wanted to meet him and get an autographed copy, but we could not count on that every year. Autographed copies of books by professors are generally not sought-after items.

That cost and access are inseparable is no secret in honors, making it hard to refute charges that honors is elitist, even unintentionally. An honors

education costs the university the same amount for every student, whatever their means, and it is an institutional luxury whose value added is not in cash. One should not be able to buy one's way in, but the fact is that students with family resources are better able to absorb the hidden costs of features such as study abroad, internships, and conference attendance. We began to wonder how many of the 126 participants who came in 2022 would come again in 2023 if it was no longer free. The 2021 conference had brought us repeat business. People came for the first day and came back for the second. They came back the next year. Would they do it again?

In the end, we decided that the 2023 conference, *Finding Our Voices—Maryland Honors Students Speak* (mdhonorscouncil.weebly.com/2023-conference.html), would be hybrid. Friday would be in person, starting at 10 a.m. with a reinstated poster session followed by lunch, an afternoon of presentations and workshops with two plenaries, dinner, and the awards presentation. The posters stayed up all day to provide plenty of time for the Executive Board to wander through them at their leisure and vote for the best ones. Without an after-dinner event, there was ample time for us to recognize all the nominees for the Portz awards, not just the winner, so everyone in the room could hear about their contributions to their honors programs and their communities as well as their academic achievements. Best poster (5) and best proposal (4) winners were almost all in attendance because they were conference presenters. We finished by 8 p.m., enabling everyone who was returning home enough time to get there safely, including the 15 participants from Montgomery College who had driven up in a rented bus. Participants who were staying over had the choice of attending the Saturday conference from their hotel rooms or checking out and attending from the host institution, which opened up a computer lab to accommodate them.

Saturday's conference was entirely virtual, cutting our carbon footprint in half. On the first day, we brought the participants to the conference. On the second day, once they were already actively engaged in the conference experience and had begun to meet people, we took the conference to them. We cut the number of meals in half; Saturday's were the two meals that most often went uneaten. We saved the cost of overnight lodging for almost every program. With half the meals, we were able to charge \$80 for the in-person conference on Friday with Saturday thrown in for free and \$30 for Saturday only, anticipating that we might not always be able to count on free tech support (see Table 1 for comparative data). We livestreamed the plenaries and the awards presentation but did not tape the student presentations.

In part this was logistical and in part it was legal; Maryland requires the consent of all parties for taping, and we wanted to provide as safe and private a space as possible for students to share.

Table 1. MCHC Conference Costs to Attend, 2020-2023

Year	Format	Registration Fee	Travel	Lodging
2020	In Person	\$95 for entire conference—whether both days or only one session	Varied from school van to bus rental or personal vehicles with and without carpooling	Local hotel recommended: \$125/room for one night; 12 rooms needed by two schools
2021	Virtual	None	None	None
2022	Virtual	None	None	None
2023	Hybrid	\$80 for both days; \$30 if only attending on virtual Saturday	Varied from school van to bus rental or students driving themselves	Optional

When we announced that the conference would be hybrid and issued the call for proposals, we offered students the opportunity to present either in person or virtually. They chose in person by a factor of two to one, which we had anticipated in scheduling a 10 a.m. start time and eliminating the experiential learning session that is usually scheduled for Friday. Fortunately, we were able to slot in everyone for Friday who wanted Friday, although we did notice that we could create many more virtual breakout room sessions in a time slot than we could provide classrooms for in real space. We also noticed that a small audience is much more conspicuous and disheartening in an actual classroom than it is on Zoom, where five or six people at the side of a shared screen feels like a full house rather than an empty table. People who asked to present on Saturday included everyone who could not come to the in-person conference on Friday because of conflicts or who could not make the trip at all. One student whose project was about the healing properties of sound had to be talked into a virtual presentation when we explained that they could only direct the soundscape into people’s individual headsets if they were listening to the presentation on their own computers or phones, which would be impossible to do live in a physical college classroom.

Table 2. MCHC Conference Participation, 2020-2023

Year	Format	Schools Participating	Registration/ Attendance	Est. Total Viewers
2020	In Person	13	126 registered	126
2021	Virtual	15	230 attended	300
2022	Virtual	10	126 attended	154
2023	Hybrid	12	230 registered, schools receive invoice after the conference	300

As seen in Table 2, 230 people registered for the hybrid conference, the same number as for *In Honors...Black Lives Matter*. As before, we allowed anyone who had registered to share the link (part of the reason for the \$30 fee), and participants used it to give access to their families, their significant others, and their friends. Our honors students were able to reach out to a much larger general public than just one another. Their biggest fans were able to attend without having to make the trip, including the livestreamed events on Friday. In addition to presenters, participants were able to attend without traveling. They attended on their phones from work, from the sidelines of soccer games, and from the parking lot of Panera. One student who was homeless was able to attend from his state-funded hotel room. Between the time we sent out acceptances and the week of the conference, so many presenters had asked to move from in person to virtual that the distribution across the two days was about equal. No one had to cancel. When the conference was fully in person, we generally had about a 10-15% cancellation rate. In 2023, we were able to move everyone to Saturday who could not make it on Friday, including several students who were sick, three who had COVID exposure, and sisters whose ride did not show up. One student who had trouble getting into the site and ended up being too late for her session was instantly moved to another session in an adjacent breakout room; her audience just followed her there. Diversity followed access because students could attend at no cost on their phones if someone (including us) gave them the link. Clearly, cost was not an obstacle as we had almost double the number of participants at the hybrid conference in 2023 as we had had at the virtual conference in 2022, which was completely free. Weather will never be a factor because a hybrid conference can always be moved fully online if necessary. As seen in Table 3, the hybrid conference

combines best practices from its traditional and virtual predecessors and was relatively easy to do.

Table 3. Conference Transition from Traditional to Hybrid Model

Feature	Traditional	Virtual	Hybrid
Proposal Process	Director submits all school proposals to MCHC Executive Board for review	No change	No change
Proposal Feedback	Written feedback sent to director (accepted, provisional acceptance with resubmission, or rejected)	No change	No change
Registration	Email from director to MCHC	No change	No change
Travel	Arrange with your college/university	None	Arrange with your college/university
Hotel Reservations	Reserve rooms needed—one student per bed for one night	None	Optional
Tech Set Up	Host school provided rooms with presentation technology	University of Baltimore provided Zoom and staff support	Both modalities used
Creating the Program	Printed 2-3 days before conference; changes announced and posted	Virtual with PDF drafts sent out by email; constantly updated	Virtual with PDF drafts sent out by email; constantly updated
Editing the Program	Static	Easy to shift student to virtual session on Saturday	Retained virtual program with easy changes
Transfer Networking Event	“Speed Dating” session on program	Virtual speed dating in breakout rooms	“Speed Dating” returned to in-person Friday session

Conference Speakers & Content	Speakers from outside MCHC	If speakers scheduled, use MCHC people	If speakers scheduled, use MCHC people
City as Text™	Occasionally used	None	None
MCHC conference awards and Portz awards for outstanding honors student in Maryland	Friday evening event winners recognized; 2-year & 4-year Portz winner announced	Continued virtually	Returned to in person with livestreaming
Oral Presentations	In person	Virtual	In person or virtual
Poster Presentations	In person	None	In person
Student Panels		New virtual sessions	Virtual sessions retained
Evaluations	Filled out and collected in person	Sent out by email	Sent out by email

LESSONS LEARNED

What next? What did we learn from this experiment? We will be keeping the hybrid format because, although no one wants to return to fully online, no one wants to return to fully in person either. Our national conference has been struggling for some time because the cost of the conference is too steep for many honors programs, especially the small ones and those without endowments. Even the cost of membership is high for some programs. Our regional conference is struggling to draw a large enough crowd to meet its contracts with hotels. Honors programs in Maryland bring their students to our conference to gain presentation skills and experience because we have been able to make it financially and logistically accessible even to the least funded honors programs in our state.

During the COVID years, the conference added new plenary sessions led by students and designed for student voices to be heard foremost. These virtual sessions have remained popular with the students because they add a wealth of value to the conference experience and typically influence the subsequent year's conference theme. Students are truly partners in this learning endeavor and have increased the value of honors learning in the post-COVID setting by pulling faculty into it with them. If for no other reason, this partnership justifies the hybrid model.

But there is more. We feel that our approach embodies the “NCHC Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education” (National Collegiate Honors Council), in particular the emphasis on equity, inclusion, and expanded access by reducing costs, maximizing use of technology, and strengthening diversity while increasing excellence. Table 4 summarizes how the hybrid conference model can both enhance the value of the honors learning experience and broaden access to include more students.

Table 4. Hybrid Conference Advantages

Conference Feature	Advantages
Increases accessibility	Fulfills “NCHC Shared Principles”
	Allows more students from a diverse array of institutions to participate
	Welcomes family and friends
Increases flexibility	Gets around work and family commitments
	Provides logistical options for honors programs/colleges
Decreases costs	Helps cash-strapped honors programs/colleges be viable centers of honors learning on and off their campuses
Innovative	Showcases innovation and problem solving as pillars of honors learning
	Provides a transformative experiential learning opportunity
	Enhances value of honors learning in the post-COVID world
More environmentally responsible	Reduces carbon footprint in terms of travel and utility usage
	Mitigates food waste
Good marketing	Uses cyberspace technology to share honors learning with the public and potentially with honors programs currently outside the NCHC fold

We hope to start a grassroots movement with what we learned from this unintended experiment, particularly in regard to equity and inclusion. This semi-revolution, the hybrid model, this mixture of the familiar with the new, removed time and transportation barriers for students, democratized participation, and reduced the financial barrier for smaller honors programs. If honors is serious about access, we believe this model is one that other jurisdictions could and should emulate.

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