From Individuals to Neighbors: Growth through Embracing Positionality

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Abstract: Drawing inspiration from Dr. Ada Long's (1995) presidential address, the authors describe an experience that facilitates neighborhood-building among honors educators and students across the nation as well as a neighborhood approach to understanding social problems. Focusing on food justice in the first year of the Justice Challenge, honors students learn about community needs, develop leadership and partnership skills, and collaborate with community members through an array of opportunities. Throughout the academic year, individual positionality shifts through deeper engagement with multiple viewpoints and facilitates new approaches for collaboration toward effectively addressing thorny problems. Cultivation of such connections is central in revitalizing neighborhoods and meeting the challenges that Long encouraged honors educators to consider nearly three decades ago.

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Reflecting on the all-too-human instinct to view situations from one's own point of view, Dr. Ada Long's poignant recounting of conference food line politics in her 1995 NCHC Presidential Address encourages us to consider the intersection between positionality (i.e., critical reflection on identity, individual social positions, and/or honors' organizational position that can unmask biases hindering inclusion of alternative viewpoints and partnership development) and the possibilities for building authentic neighborly connections. Long's insightful commentary on "honors as neighborhood" resists the temptation of oversimplification. She challenges honors educators to create new spaces for meaningful engagement, and her reflections on "neighborhood" point to the complicated nature of proximity and even community. Now, nearly 30 years later, Long's call to action remains as relevant as the day it was delivered. In this article, we honor Ada's memory with our own examination of what it means to be a neighbor and the role of honors in the revitalization of neighborhoods.

Neighborly relations are complicated. Just as Fred Rogers explored the complexities of social and political relations within neighborhoods by engaging youths on a national television forum, Long engaged the young minds of college students within the honors classroom. Both brilliantly juxtaposed the similarities and common interests of neighbors with inherent otherness and differences; both examined the benefits and challenges of belonging in a neighborhood. Neighbors at their best transcend differences and engage in helpful and supportive acts, but they can also foster conformity or enact exclusionary practices. In her address, Long identifies a more specific development that presents new challenges that are still relevant: the privatization of neighborhoods. She captures the issues surrounding suburbanization, which has loosened the community bonds of older American neighborhoods. Following Lasch (1995), she mourns the loss of "political" conversation that "fosters not just information but understanding, not just self-assertion but negotiation, not just chatter but wisdom" (5). She professes that political conversation is the "kind of conversation we want in our honors classes" (5).

The economic stratification of neighborhoods, the loss of social capital, and, in the 30 years following Long's speech, the effects of technology on social relationships have arguably made it more difficult to communicate through differences. Teaching civic skills is a key part of meaningful community building that allows members to engage with one another to develop understanding even through opposing views. Such a curriculum might include active and patient listening and taking seriously one's perspective

and life experience in relation to those of others while respecting pluralism and reasonable disagreement as integral to democratic societies. A sense of common purpose is not a given; it needs to be built, perhaps especially when the thorniest and most important problems of our times are neither restricted geographically nor equal in their effects across communities.

Toward this goal, Long challenges honors educators to:

> experiment with new ways of opening up our conversations, widening our loyalties, and deepening our responsibilities so that, instead of looking back to the old model of the neighborhood, we redefine our human connections in ways that cut across geography, class, and culture. (9)

An effective response to Long's call requires re-envisioning the concept of "neighborhood" in a way that transcends the particularity of space while still encompassing it, thus forging unlikely human connections in new and meaningful ways. Here we tell the story of how in 2020, honors deans and directors from 14 institutions of higher education united through a shared goal of fostering and mentoring a national honors neighborhood comprised of scholars and students.

Our vision is one where "every honors student has access to the top content experts and educators in the nation/world. [And that these students would] have regular access to one another, collectively cultivating a comprehensive worldview, unrestricted by geography or financial need" (Kotinek et al., 2023, p. 122). Achieving such a vision is no small feat. A nearly two-year process of developing this team of professionals—many of whom had never met before engaging in this endeavor—and identifying strategies for leveraging each member's strengths in relation to the overall objective resulted in the rise of the cohesive Honors Collaborative (Bott-Knutson et al., 2023). The process itself resembled the formation of a virtual neighborhood—one in which neighbors navigated different perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds while fortifying the community through acts of service and support. One of the early objectives of the team was to conceptualize a space for honors education to enhance human connection through purposeful community engagement (Appel et al., 2023). This idea of community education was ultimately embedded within our flagship curriculum: the Justice Challenge (Kotinek et al., 2023).

The Justice Challenge represents a collaborative honors "experiment" that responds to Long's call to action. Through focused work around complex, interdisciplinary "wicked problems," project leaders have implemented

innovative pedagogical approaches to open up conversations, widen loyalties, and deepen responsibilities in ways that redefine human connections across geography, class, and culture. Because the project's work is framed around lived experiences in real neighborhoods, students examine their own positionalities as leaders in relation to the issue, adopt equity-oriented perspectives, and deeply consider (to paraphrase Long, again) the lives, beliefs, histories, expertise, and futures of those whose experiences are different from their own. Each year-long cohort of participants in the Justice Challenge focuses on an annual theme. The first cohort, which took place during the 2023–2024 academic year, focused on food justice. Each element of the experience engaged participants in community building and awareness of community positionality:

1. An interdisciplinary online colloquium featured case studies based in the experiences of real-world communities.

2. Virtual hackathons placed students in interdisciplinary problem-solving (i.e., hacking) teams to formulate and present approaches to food justice in particular communities.

3. Design challenge teams spent one or two semesters researching, partnering with local stakeholders, and generating ideas in response to food justice in their home communities.

4. A weeklong food justice field course immersed students in a focal community to explore firsthand the complexities and contexts of food justice.

5. A culminating conference at year's end convened students and faculty for shared reflection and a call to action.

Perhaps one of the most poignant outcomes of the Justice Challenge is that participants in each of our four geographically disparate sites for the design challenge were similarly prepared with content and associated professional development related to food justice yet they partnered with their respective communities to build four distinct and customized approaches to serve the unique food justice needs of each community.

The concept and work of "neighborhood" were salient throughout this collaborative endeavor in several forms. Students were immersed in the lives, experiences, and stories of communities (i.e., their human neighbors), illuminating struggles with food insecurity and an unjust food system as

well as work in the trenches in creative and compelling ways to address the issues. On another level, a neighborhood of sorts emerged among the students, faculty, and stakeholders who were part of the project. While most participants were connected only via Zoom, a shared knowledge base, understanding of the issue, mutual respect, and desire to make a difference were repeatedly demonstrated in virtual conversations, academic work, and actions taken by participants on individual and community levels. Through this honors experience, a novel learning community and conceptualization of neighborhood sprouted among neighbors from across honors institutions that likely would not otherwise have crossed paths.

Honors students from an array of locations grappled with their positionality and critically assessed the historical and current considerations that contributed to their individual perspectives and the overarching situation. They learned from readings and discussion, from each other, from community leaders, from experiences, and ultimately from the neighborhood that they created. As articulated by one student, Abby Sherwood, at the end of the experience: "Thanks all for such a great learning experience and community! Hope to stay in touch and work together again!" The feeling of community was shared by the instructors, too. As noted by Rachael Budowle, "we just formed an amazing community in the classroom. It's not an exaggeration to say that this was one of my most fulfilling teaching experiences. Every student was there for the right reason and really showed up and committed every single day." Transcending geography, class, and culture, both the student and faculty participants in this experience moved beyond an examination of their own heaped or sparsely filled plates to question topics such as overarching food procurement and distribution systems and whether lines can become spheres that envelop everyone equally.

Social justice takes shape when people, despite varied positionalities, collaborate to attain a shared vision. Through a yearlong focus on food justice, participants in the Justice Challenge engaged each other and drew community members together in a neighborhood approach toward greater food justice. Wicked problems have no easy or singular solutions, and perhaps the steps taken by participants and facilitators of the Justice Challenge are small in comparison to the immensity of food justice need facing our world. Yet these steps taken by honors students are ones where highly talented, highly motivated, and highly energized students deepened their understanding, commitment, and transdisciplinary skills. As Nobel laureate Saul Perlmutter recently stressed, breakthroughs happen when people collaborate effectively, and, if we can cultivate ways to bridge divides and

bring people together, we can create needed solutions: "people should be aware of this, that this isn't simply a catastrophic time in history. This is also a time of great possibility and great capability that we've never had in front of us before. . . . I think we are remarkably close to being able to make a world that everybody would feel wonderful about living in" (Perlmutter & Galvin, 2024, p. 33). Nearly 30 years after Long's address, work remains to be done, but we believe that she would agree that opportunities cultivated through honors spaces, like the Justice Challenge, can foster neighborhood development and move us closer to creating a more positive, just, and equitable world.

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