Honors, Equity, and the Difference Principle

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Abstract: While honors programs have made notable advancements in diversity and inclusion, the issue of educational equity remains unresolved. Tensions between providing special opportunities for high-achieving students and adhering to principles of social justice continue to shape the "neighborhood of honors." This essay seeks to address educational unfairness through Rawls's "difference principle," which asserts that inequalities are morally permissible only if they benefit the least advantaged in society. The author suggests that honors programs can adhere to this principle by focusing on service and support for marginalized groups within and beyond the campus community, providing opportunities for talented students from underserved backgrounds, and engendering a sense of social responsibility throughout curricula. In this way, honors can thoughtfully and purposefully meet the needs of its students while championing the principles of fairness, inclusivity, and equal rights for all.

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Reading through Ada Long's 1995 NCHC Presidential Address, I was struck by how many of her central concerns still feel relevant—indeed, urgent—thirty years later. From the geographical sorting of American society by wealth, education, and political ideology (Bishop, 2009) to the acceleration of socioeconomic inequalities (Piketty, 2014) and the fragmentation and alienation of digital cultures (Haidt, 2024), Long seemed to possess a preternatural sense of the fundamental challenges that American

society would face in the twenty-first century. Her thoughtful, funny, and provocative essay provides a welcome opportunity to reflect upon how the honors community has grappled with these fraught sociopolitical trends over the past several decades. My contribution aims to tease out one of Long's underlying threads that remains an underexamined, even uncomfortable, subject in the honors community: the relationship between honors, justice, and educational equity.

Although Long never uses the term "equity," this idea lies at the heart of her buffet line metaphor, which deftly illustrates how beliefs about moral desert and social responsibility are shaped by one's positionality and privilege. Those at the front of the line want to believe that their enviable spot was earned through hard work and merit, while those at the back are more attuned to the arbitrariness and injustice of their circumstances. By raising the possibility that we in honors are the ones at the head of the line, gobbling up the choicest portions and leaving only scraps for everyone else, Long challenges us to confront the inherent tensions between the traditional role of honors education—to bestow special opportunities, benefits, and accolades upon the highest-achieving and most meritorious students—and our self-professed commitment as educators to principles of inclusion, diversity, equality, and social justice. Although we would like to imagine honors as an integrated, inclusive neighborhood bound by ties of solidarity, Long raises the troubling possibility that we are instead "the equivalent of the specialized suburban communities . . . where the conversations, loyalties, and caring are limited to a small, privileged segment of the society we live in" (7). It took courage to stand before friends and colleagues and pose such difficult questions, but Long understood that honors educators must take seriously the all-too-familiar criticisms of our community as elitist, inequitable, and in service only to the most advantaged students. If such accusations contain a kernel of truth, what, if anything, are we morally bound to do about it?

This forum commemorating Long's distinguished career in honors seems an appropriate venue to revisit this sensitive issue: are we still the greedy first-in-liners, the gated suburb? Have we made progress over the past three decades toward her aspiration of making honors a true neighborhood? On an optimistic note, there is no doubt that honors education is far more diverse today than it was in the mid-1990s, specifically in terms of race, ethnicity, first-generation identity, socioeconomic status, gender identity, and neurodiversity. This shift toward greater demographic inclusivity has been the result of tireless efforts of many in NCHC leadership (including Long!) to push honors programs and colleges across the country to

broaden their approach to recruitment and admissions, eliminate program fees, develop more flexible and diverse curricula, embrace critical pedagogies, and attract more faculty from underrepresented backgrounds (Jones, 2017). One only need compare the themes and language in "NCHC Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education" (2022) with the prior "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program" (2008) to see how dramatically honors has reimagined some of its fundamental commitments to marginalized and historically underserved communities.

Although it is surely premature to raise the "mission accomplished" banner for our efforts to make honors a diverse and inclusive space, we should not ignore the progress that has been made in recent decades. However, can the same be said about educational equity? While there is evidence that honors programs and colleges can narrow race- and class-based equity gaps (Decker et al., 2023), if we understand the goal of educational equity to be helping all college students achieve similar levels of academic attainment and success, then it is harder to see how honors programs and colleges serve this end. For even if they achieved numerically perfect representation in terms of the aforementioned demographic categories, the median honors student would *still* be more academically successful, curious, motivated, and self-directed than the rest of the student population on campus. Moreover, if the *raison d'être* of honors is to make these already "above average" students even more successful by tracking them into specialized coursework, providing them supplemental advising and mentoring, and offering them generous scholarships, such efforts would widen equity gaps between honors and non-honors students, even if such programs had no adverse impact on the success of the rest of the student body. In other words, an honors education that involves curricular and co-curricular programming that separates undergraduate students by ability (however defined) cannot, by definition and design, be fully commensurable with educational equity. To return to Long's metaphors, our buffet line may now be somewhat reordered (with more BIPOC, queer, working-class, first-generation, disabled, and neurodivergent students nearer the front) but the line itself remains. To put it more bluntly, a diverse gated community still has a gate.

To my mind, the key question for honors educators is: how do we justify our existence in a world where educational equity—conceptualized in the broadest possible way—is increasingly embedded in institutional mission statements, strategic initiatives, grant programs, assessment plans, and professional development opportunities? How do we respond to the well-intentioned, equity-minded university administrator who wonders why

we should spend limited institutional resources on honors students who seem to be doing just fine, or expresses concerns that the honors program (or college) will widen, not shrink, the attainment gap between the academic haves and have-nots? What do we say to those who insist educational equity requires helping those who most need academic support, even if that means sacrificing some opportunities for honors students to fully realize their potential?

Since such questions are fundamentally normative (values-based), not empirical (data-based), we cannot respond by citing recent studies demonstrating that honors programs at two-year colleges significantly improve academic attainment even when controlling for GPA or other success metrics (Honeycutt, 2017) or the decades of research in K-12 education showing that "[g]ifted students benefit greatly from being placed in special groups or programs that were specifically designed to serve them" (Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016, p. 889). The honors-skeptical equity-minded administrator, like the mixed-ability grouping advocate in primary and secondary education, is less concerned with the most successful and gifted students than those who might be "left behind." They will surely ask: what happens to everyone else when we sort out the most talented, ambitious, and enthusiastic students into their own special classes? What opportunities for academic modeling and mentorship are lost? What if identifying and tracking some students as high achieving harm the self-esteem of those who do not get chosen (Sotirakopulos, 2023)?

To my mind, the fundamental choice we face is whether equity should be the highest value of an educational system; that is, should we care more about how much a student (or group of students) is learning *relative* to other students (or groups of students) or how much learning is happening overall? While these do not have to be mutually exclusive goals, it would be a mistake to assume that there are no tradeoffs between them. Personally, I would prefer an educational system that maximizes learning in the aggregate, even if that learning ends up being unequally distributed. Of course, we should provide additional academic support to those students who struggle, but not always at the expense of the higher-ability students.

How do we design a just educational system that still permits some inequalities? I think we can find inspiration in the work of political philosopher John Rawls, which navigates a middle path between libertarian meritocracy (where inequalities resulting from differences in talent, birth, and luck are considered natural and acceptable) and radical egalitarianism (which seeks to fully eliminate all inequalities in society). Rawls defines

justice as fairness, which he defends through his famous "veil of ignorance" thought experiment that asks us to consider the kind of society most people would prefer *before* they knew their actual social and economic status. He argues that in this "original position," people would choose a society in which everyone is guaranteed certain basic liberties and where the only acceptable inequalities are those that benefit the least advantaged in society (Rawls, 1999, pp. 52–53).

A thorough exploration of Rawls' framework is beyond the scope of this essay, so I want to focus on the latter concept (what he calls the "difference principle") because it can help us think through the relationship between honors and educational equity. Although Rawls placed a great deal of importance on social equality, he recognized that under certain conditions inequalities could be to the benefit of all (Rawls, 1999, pp. 65–70). For example, a society that offered higher salaries to medical researchers than bus drivers would be unequal but still just because it incentivizes the most talented people into careers where their gifts could produce innovations (e.g., pharmaceuticals, therapies, medical procedures) that would improve everyone's health, including the least advantaged (Sandel, 2009, p. 153). Rawls recognized that "natural talents" were not equally distributed among members of a society but also insisted that such talents were not exclusively our own because "the initial endowment of natural assets and the contingencies of their growth and nurture in early life are arbitrary from a moral point of view" (Rawls, 1999, p. 274). In other words, the fact that someone is more gifted at math, music, or language learning is largely a matter of luck (genetics, upbringing, etc.). He argues, more controversially, that even our efforts (hard work) are not something we "earn" in any meaningful sense. Rawls further points out that the particular skills a society rewards are also arbitrary from a moral point of view. For example, in the contemporary American economy, the ability to think abstractly and quantitatively could lead to any number of lucrative careers on Wall Street or Silicon Valley, but a very different set of skills would have likely been more richly rewarded in Iron Age Scandinavia or Old Kingdom Egypt.

Rawls' difference principle echoes one of Long's key insights: the responsibility that the privileged owe to everyone else. It forces us to recognize that we are part of a deeply interdependent society (a neighborhood, even) where one's position is largely a product of forces beyond our control. And if we cannot claim to have truly "earned" our position in line, our duty is to use our talents to help not only ourselves but everyone in line, especially those behind us. Therefore, the difference

principle suggests that an unequal distribution of resources to honors education is morally permissible only insofar as what we do in honors benefits the least advantaged members of our neighborhood.

What would this look like in practice? If we define our neighborhood as the campus community, then honors students and faculty have a responsibility to help the least advantaged students, faculty, and staff. This could take the form of tutoring and mentoring services for struggling students. On my campus, many honors students volunteer at our campus food pantries, created to assist members of the university community who are food insecure. Another way in which honors can benefit the least advantaged on campus is by offering junior (or part-time) faculty the opportunity to teach honors courses, rather than allowing senior faculty to get first preference on the most desirable classes.

Broadening our definition of neighborhood to include the local, state, or even national community raises other opportunities for honors to fulfill the difference principle. For example, when honors programs and colleges act as vehicles for social mobility, giving talented students from under-resourced communities the opportunity to access educational and career opportunities (scholarships, internships, guidance in applying for national fellowships, etc.), this clearly benefits the least advantaged in society. Moreover, honors courses should inculcate a sense of social responsibility and justice into their curriculum, encouraging our students to be aware of their unearned privileged and social responsibilities. Perhaps most importantly, honors should require some form of service to organizations that work directly with the least advantaged members of society.

The good news is that many honors programs and colleges are already engaged in such activities, which allow honors leaders to justify, from a Rawlsian perspective, their continued existence and funding on campus. Indeed, they align with Long's third response to the first-in-line positioning of honors: "we can try to bestow benefits on the less privileged—by providing tutoring services, organizing volunteer projects in the community, and sponsoring educational activities that serve the whole of our institutions or communities" (9). In fact, I believe that this framework can address Long's concern that justifying honors through service to others can lapse into a kind of self-congratulatory or status-quo justifying *noblesse oblige*. The difference principle rests on a recognition that our privileged status is not simply a product of our own merit and moral worth, but of a host of factors that are largely outside of our control. We are obligated to share our talents with others not because of a guilty conscience nor to prove our

moral superiority but rather because this is a fundamental part of the social contract.

In concluding, I would argue that what Long and Rawls each show is that the most effective and intellectually rigorous way to justify the existence of honors education is to avoid the twin traps of (1) pretending that no tensions exist between honors and equity, and (2) dismissing equity as the natural enemy of honors. Rather, we should assert, under the difference principle, that honors is *both* a source of educational inequality among undergraduate students and a vehicle for producing a just and fair educational system that works to benefit the least advantaged among us.

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