Institutional Neighborhoods and the Stories They Tell

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Abstract: As part of NCHC's tribute to Dr. Ada Long (1945-2024), this response to "Honors as Neighborhood" (1995) encourages scholars and practitioners to (re)consider the problems with conceptualizing honors programs as neighborhoods given the systemic inequalities associated with both. Drawing from experience at an R1 regional institution in the South, the author outlines the institutional histories of programming in both basic writing and honors to elucidate the systemic racism leading to the creation of these programs and illuminate the stories these programs tell about the deep stratification evident on college campuses across the nation.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; administration of education programs; institutional racism; education equalization; University of Southern Mississippi (MS) – Honors College

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A starter home in Florida.

A condominium in Arizona.

A two-bedroom rental in Texas.

A two-bedroom apartment in Louisiana.

A parsonage on two acres of land in Alabama.

A college apartment complex.

A townhouse outside of a southern city that meant my first mortgage.

A three-bedroom home in a subdivision of eight-hundred houses in Mississippi.

The homes and the neighborhoods I grew up in as a child and moved into later as an adult to raise my own children all tell very different stories. In retrospect, each community also told a story about my family and who we were at the time. All these homes were in predominantly White areas, but the socioeconomic class of each was vastly different. And in some of the

neighborhoods, there were communities within the communities, and each of these told a different story about how our family might live our day-to-day lives. It meant something to live in the "states apartments" instead of the "zoo" in New Orleans; living in a parsonage always means something, but living in one on a partially paved road in a county of 19,000 residents in south Alabama tells a very specific story; similarly, the fact that our current home is on a lake in an upper-middle-class community also communicates details about me and my family.

In "Honors as Neighborhood," Ada Long contemplates what it means to conceptualize academic areas as neighborhoods, and she encourages us to recognize that the metaphor of neighborhoods may be problematic when applied to honors education given the ways neighborhoods continue to shift to "income-based communities" (8). She urges administrators and practitioners to evaluate our views on social justice and to envision how we might "redefine our human connections in ways that cut across geography, class, and culture" (9). Certainly, in the thirty years since Long made this entreaty, both neighborhoods and honors education have continued to evolve. This said, the unstated tensions around race and class in Long's piece give me pause. I find myself wanting her to be even more direct in her acknowledgment of the positioning of honors within an institution and in what it means to consider this positioning through the somewhat fraught metaphorical lens of the neighborhood. If we are going to recognize that within academia some programs are "suburbanized," then we also have to recognize that some communities are "ghettoized." Such acknowledgements require difficult questions about programmatic histories, resources, who makes up the individuals in these "neighborhoods," and the relationship of honors education to these various entities and those who "dwell" there.

I would like to use my own institution—and the moves I have made between "neighborhoods" during my tenure here—as an example of the importance of acknowledging our histories and our positioning within our individual institutions. I teach in Mississippi, the Blackest state in the nation, and I teach at the most racially diverse four-year institution in our state. I spent most of my career administering the university's writing program, training graduate instructors, and teaching students often considered at-risk. After more than a decade of this work, I was asked to serve in a very different capacity: as an administrator in my institution's honors college. This shift has been somewhat jarring. I went from constantly having to advocate for students and practically begging for any resources at all—a position that often felt like I was on constant defense—to having resources

and the ability to innovate without having to prove that the students we were serving deserved these things. I was excited about the prospect of investing in students in the ways these resources allowed, but, at the same time, I was shocked at the clear discrepancies involved in serving these students. I could not help but contemplate the move I had made from a community of students who seemed to be valued because they meant higher enrollment numbers to a community of students who appeared to be valued because of what they might contribute to the university.

As I contemplate the differences between these two student communities and my capacity to serve them ethically and effectively, it occurs to me that the programs that enable the identities of students classified as "basic writers" and those deemed "honors scholars" are rooted in similar—and problematic—histories. Comparing these shared histories, histories that led to the development of very different "neighborhoods," means acknowledging the role of racism in how a university is divided into communities (to continue with Long's metaphor). It also requires us to contemplate the ways we might be more intentional in how we define what it means to be part of these communities. Both honors education and basic writing programs and the pedagogies they espouse have pushed for access and diversity (for "honors and access," see Stitch; Hilton and Jordan; Cognard-Black and Spisak; for "basic writing and access" see Fox; Soliday; Stanley; Llamos). And institutional histories and scholarship suggest that both honors (Cantrell; Francis and Darity; Stitch) and basic writing programming (Bartholomae; Shor; Otte and Mlynarczyk) originated as racist responses to the integration of higher education.

While basic writing scholarship often points to specific historical moments as pivotal in the creation of basic writing programming, scholarship in honors education tends to acknowledge the elitism and racial implications of honors education with less focus on external, historical moments that may have influenced institutional histories. Owen Cantrell acknowledges the ways racism led to the creation of honors education in the secondary classroom setting, but he also suggests that at the collegiate level this *de facto* segregation is something that we "inherit," that students come to us already divided into their respective neighborhoods (22). In their comprehensive study of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic underrepresentation in collegiate honors education, Andrew J. Cognard-Black and Art L. Spisak suggest that the most successful efforts to recruit and retain students traditionally excluded from honors programs involve not just granting them access to those programs, but creating a culture that is welcoming

and inclusive to underrepresented students, one that acknowledges why they might not feel welcomed in the first place (104). Cognard-Black and Spisak gesture to both the gatekeeping criteria of honors programming and the perceptions of honors spaces as exclusive to certain students as reasons that many students choose not to participate in honors. And while they do not explicitly say that these programs tend to be perceived as white spaces (or gated upper-class communities), they clearly acknowledge why traditionally underrepresented students might feel this way. Thinking through this more recent research alongside Long's contemplations of "honors as neighborhood" provides an interesting opportunity to explore the origins of honors programs, their roots in racism, and how current practitioners might learn from these histories.

A brief history of my own institution illustrates the ways these programs were developed in response to shifting political landscapes that often ran parallel to specific moments in education history involving open admissions, integration, and cries of literacy crises. Established in 1910 as Mississippi Normal College, the University of Southern Mississippi's (USM) original mission was to train teachers. USM began offering its first honors classes in 1965. However, 1965 was an important year in other respects as well. It was in 1965 that the first African American students, Raylawni Branch and Gwendolyn Elaine Armstrong, enrolled at USM. In 1969, *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education* required all southern states to integrate their public schools, and in spring 1970, Mississippi public schools were ordered to abide by this mandate. In 1971, the first fall semester following these orders, the university offered their first honors classes that were not honors versions of general education courses, creating Honors Colloquium, a class devoted to studies of history, literature, and philosophy. In 1975, Jake Ayers filed what would become *Ayers v. Fordice*, one of the most prominent desegregation cases in higher education (and one that would linger in the courts for over two decades). Six months later, in 1976, the honors program officially became an honors college, the first in the state of Mississippi. A new neighborhood was constructed, one that enabled specific stories for those invited to move in and one that clearly distinguished these student residents from the rest of the student body.

Similar parallel and pointed histories are evident in the institutionalization of basic writing programming at SMU. The same year (1971) that the honors college began offering Colloquium and the year after Mississippi schools were ordered to abide by *Alexander v. Holmes*, USM offered their

first basic writing course, a course termed "Fundamentals," for students who were deemed unprepared for college writing. This course—and the students who were required to take it—evolved over the past five decades, but the course consistently enrolled higher percentages of Black students. In the average year (with some exceptions), the Black student population in the course was anywhere from 50% to 80%. In 1992, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the district and appellate courts' rulings in *Ayers v. Fordice* and remanded the case back to the district court. And in 1995—the same year Long gave her talk at the National Collegiate Honors Council Conference—the district court, using the Supreme Court's standard, determined that there was evidence of segregation in Mississippi's college system. In the thirty years that have passed since then, both the basic writing program and the honors college have doubled in size. Almost one third of incoming first-year students at our R1 institution are placed into basic writing programming, but the incoming honors cohort includes fewer than ten percent of entering students. Of course, these student numbers, like the metaphorical neighborhoods the students are grouped into, tell stories about the deep stratification evident on college campuses across the nation.

Amy E. Stitch makes a compelling point when she notes that "try as we might to reverse or dismantle the mechanisms that stratify, new divisions grow up out of the old like an homage to an unequal past. It is clear that breaking with these stubborn patterns requires challenging the very mechanisms to which we cling with something akin to moral purpose" (Stitch). Her overarching argument, that concepts of access in all levels of higher education have been co-opted to serve the status quo, is also an important consideration when thinking about "honors as neighborhood," in part because we often cling to the idea of the neighborhood without addressing the systemic inequities built into the very fabric of what makes a neighborhood and the often unstated attributes that determine whether people see it as a "good" neighborhood or not. Ultimately, I would suggest that Long's essay encourages honors administrators, educators, and students to critically reflect on the problems associated with the neighborhood metaphor due to the not-so-invisible racial and socioeconomic lines that demarcate individual neighborhoods as well as the metaphorical and literal worth of the individuals who reside in those communities. More importantly, perhaps she is asking the next generation of honors advocates to enact an ethos of transparency and to acknowledge that the stories we tell about students when we invite them to reside in the "suburban honors neighborhood"

or the "ghettoized basic writing neighborhood" are not our stories to tell. Instead, we should invite students to explore how the boundaries of academic communities need to be redrawn so they can create spaces to tell their own stories.

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