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Radical Honors: Pedagogical Troublemaking as a Model for Institutional Change

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Abstract: This presidential speech to attendees of the 2019 NCHC annual conference in New Orleans resituates honors education as a site of deeply radical practices and provides a call to action to honors educators both to own the transgressiveness of our pedagogical approaches and to extend that troublemaking project to processes beyond the classroom, processes like honors recruitment and admissions, faculty appointments, co-curricular programming, and assessment, among others. Given the academy's traditional resistance to change, an opportunity exists for those in the honors community to step forward and radically alter the structures and practices of higher education, all in the service of students and their learning.

Keywords: academic innovation; diversity; anti-elitism; right to education; student success

(What follows is the 2019 presidential address delivered at the annual NCHC conference on November 9 in New Orleans, Louisiana.)

A recent alumnus of our honors college headed off to graduate school last year, where he taught the requisite writing classes as part of his fellowship package. Not knowing any better, he adopted many of the pedagogical strategies he had learned in honors, the most important of which was running class as a conversation that put student voices at the center of the learning experience. His fellow grad students were flummoxed: "What in the world are you doing?" they asked incredulously. No doubt nervous that this seemingly radical approach represented a stark departure from the more familiar method

modeled by their graduate faculty—holding forth at the head of the seminar table while periodically asking acolytes to chime in and affirm—these grad students were calling out a threat to that system. The undergraduates, on the other hand, loved this approach, praised the instructor, and even asked on one student evaluation if the class period might not be extended due to the rich conversations.

What are we to make of this little account? First, it signals just how hungry our students are for deep conversation about difficult topics, especially these days, having been raised against the backdrop of seemingly intractable global problems and surrounded by the noise of public figures shouting at each other rather than collaborating on solutions. And while there are few practices more tiresome than adults fretting about the habits of young people—that tradition goes at least as far back as Plato’s *Republic*—it is incontrovertible that our students’ total immersion in the digital world has exacerbated their feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and anxiety. For example, psychologist Jean M. Twenge notes that high school seniors devote an average of six hours a day to new media—texting, surfing the internet, gaming, and video-chatting (51). In effect, virtually all their leisure time is spent enveloped in this electronic cloud, a circumstance that causes one of the subjects of Twenge’s 2017 study to declare of her generation: “I think we like our phones more than we like actual people” (2). MIT social scientist Sherry Turkle has called out the many dangers of this “flight from conversation,” the most significant of which is that we are raising a generation that has not had the opportunity to “develop the capacity for empathy” (4, 3). Given such contexts, opportunities for engaged discussion in class have never been more important.

Second, this account reminds us that the academy—one of the most fossilized and conservative institutions in the world—is very slow to welcome change, let alone drive it. My student’s story, in fact, essentially approximates bell hooks’s memory of her own graduate school education forty years ago, which she understood as providing a forum for professors “to enact rituals of control that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power” (5). Those teachers, she continues, “seemed enthralled by the exercise of power and authority within their mini-kingdoms, the classroom” (17). For hooks, the answer lay in liberatory learning that generated “pleasure in the classroom,” “movement beyond accepted boundaries,” and flexible class agendas that allowed for “spontaneous shifts in direction” (7). Ultimately, this “radical pedagogy” (8)—hooks’s phrase—was centered on “hearing one another’s voices . . . recognizing one another’s presence” (8) through dialogic exchange.

hooks's approach was deliberately radical, a direction announced in the title of her book *Teaching to Transgress*. The question I want to pose is why we in the honors community so infrequently call out the transgressiveness of our project. Why do we not foreground honors as a site of deeply radical practices? And what would it look like if we intentionally owned our position as academic and pedagogical troublemakers and even extended that radical viewpoint to our practices beyond the classroom?

We are, after all, up to something in honors. We don't fit; we disrupt; we make those around us uneasy, all in the service of student learning. For example, in addition to centering the classroom on student voices, honors faculty typically insist on transgressing disciplinary boundaries in an educational system that has been built around subject fields for centuries. Honors offers an alternative path to—or at least casts a skeptical eye on—the blessed disciplines and the lenses through which they see and understand the world. These disciplinary frameworks, of course, are artificial constructs shaped by culture, bias, and error. While such structures are comforting, they encourage a kind of single-axis thinking that interdisciplinarity disrupts. As one recent essay on intersectionality reminds us, interdisciplinarity has been often so important to “critical feminist and antiracist inquiry . . . [because it] encourages researchers to unsettle their ossified patterns of knowledge production by seeing their object(s) of inquiry from another standpoint(s)” (Moradi and Grzanka 503). Put another way, the myopia of privilege can often be corrected—or at least highlighted—through criticality and conversation across difference.

Our longstanding embrace of experiential learning, which has been a hallmark of honors for over a half century in programs like City as Text™ and more recently Partners in the Parks, is informed by the insistence that the boundaries of the classroom need to be torn down and knowledge production must be rescued from its current limiting processes. Walker Percy's remarkable essay “The Loss of the Creature” takes up two primary challenges to genuine and unencumbered knowledge production, what he calls seeing “the thing as it is” (47): first, most objects have “been appropriated by the symbolic complex” that has already shaped how the knowledge seeker will receive the object (47); and second, we have ceded the ground of knowledge making to “those experts within whose competencies a particular segment of the horizon is *thought* to lie” (55, my emphasis). The solution, according to Percy, rests in the power of experiential learning even, though he does not use that phrase. Percy advocates

(1) an openness of the thing before one—instead of being an exercise to be learned according to an approved mode, it is a garden of delights which beckons to one; (2) a sovereignty of the knower—instead of being a consumer of a prepared experience, I am a sovereign way-farer, a wanderer in the neighborhood of being who stumbles into the garden. (60)

The beauty of Percy's approach is that the foundation for learning is grounded in a receptivity to bewilderment, not a place of comfort for most conventional knowledge-seekers.

The prevalence in honors of team teaching to drive dialogue across disciplines represents another kind of troublemaking that sits uneasily in the modern academy, where worship of the efficiency mantra above all else sometimes elides what is best for students. In addition to being an incredibly powerful professional development experience for faculty and thus a boon to the overall institution, team teaching helps students live in the gray area between disciplines where answers are less certain; models for students what such constructively frictional dialogue looks like; and resituates faculty beside students as fellow learners in the classroom even though the power differential between those two groups will never disappear fully. In a characterization reminiscent of Percy's call to action, Kathryn M. Plank notes that team teaching "moves beyond the familiar and predictable and creates an environment of uncertainty, dialogue, and discovery. And that is what learning is all about" (3).

It has always alternately frustrated and amused me that honors is sometimes seen as a bastion of elitism since so much of what we do is deeply anti-elitist, overtly transgressive, and often progressive, even though there's certainly much more we can do to help alter that perception. You might recall the name Ronald Nelson, the student highlighted in one of Frank Bruni's 2015 *New York Times* articles. Admitted to all eight Ivy League institutions, Nelson chose instead to attend the University of Alabama's honors college, citing both the generous scholarship support and the more diverse environment. As Bruni noted, honors can "give students some of the virtues and perks of private schools without some of the drawbacks, such as exorbitant tuition and an enclave of extreme privilege." While I was pleased to read this piece in 2015, I was also struck by the vitriolic remarks in the online comments section to the article, with many readers calling out the student as a fool for passing up this supposed golden ticket to success, though recent work by a number of economists has called into question the wage premium

of attendance at elite universities (Ge, Isaac, and Miller). A later *Times* article from 2018 highlighting the most popular class at Yale that year as a course on happiness suggested that Mr. Nelson might have been wise beyond his years (Shimer). The instructor of the happiness class attributed its wild popularity to the fact that many students had made themselves miserable trying to gain admittance to Yale and ultimately had no practice at being happy, so they were in search of a blueprint for that project. The course enrollment, by the way, was 1200 students, which seems less like a class and more like a good-sized riot.

Back to the question of elitism. While access has always been front and center of the mission of two-year institutions, honors programs at four-year colleges have sometimes not been as successful addressing some of the structural inequities in higher education, and so we would do well to follow the lead of our colleagues in those schools in thinking creatively about how honors can advance the causes of access and equity. For example, some recent data show that students of color are approximately half as likely to be in honors as they are in the larger student population, at least within a select group of research universities explored in a recent *JNCHC* essay (Cognard-Black and Spisak 139). In other words, honors can sometimes look like the face of privilege although it doesn't have to be so.

I would suggest that the next frontier in our collective trouble-making project should involve getting at some of the structural barriers to fuller participation in honors by students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education. How might we bring that same energy that drives our transgressive learning strategies to our work on institutional practices so that honors communities better reflect the broader student population? It seems to me that we can continue to push the access envelope by examining our admissions procedures so that they are as inclusive as possible: using holistic review of applications instead of focusing on standardized test scores that most positively correlate with family income; developing essay questions that are inclusive, e.g., focusing on thought experiments that all applicants can address rather than those favoring privileged applicants; not privileging volunteer experiences to which not all students have access because they might have other work or family responsibilities; and making sure that we don't use additional honors participation fees that will discourage or disqualify students with low-SES backgrounds from joining our community. Progress is possible: for example, our last four entering honors classes at Westminster College have a higher percentage of students with need than in the overall

entering first-year class. Then, once students are part of our programs, we need to acknowledge that not all students arrive on campus with the same set of tools in their toolbox. Just because a new student does not possess the cultural capital that passes for currency on today's college campus and needs time to adjust to university life does not mean she should be penalized by overly restrictive or punitive academic probation standards. It makes perfect sense that those who join us from communities that are different from those typically found on a college campus might need more time and support during this transition.

Another area where honors can lead is addressing mental health challenges of students by acknowledging the support they need, destigmatizing conversations about mental wellness, and using the classroom as a space where the curricular and co-curricular can come together to address our students' struggles. Honors has often been a locus of collaboration between faculty and staff in ways that are less common in disciplinary programs; we should take advantage of that history of cooperation to draw on the expertise of staff partners who work in student life and wellness areas as is happening at Georgetown University in a creative initiative called the Engelhard project, which foregrounds discussion of and reflection on mental health issues in the classroom. I am pleased to see at least fifteen sessions on mental health at this year's NCHC conference, and an NCHC monograph on the topic is in the works. When we were last in New Orleans for our meeting in 2013, only two sessions addressed this topic.

One pointed way we can take on our students' anxiety directly is interrogating how we talk about what achievement looks like. While I have written about expanding the diversity of the "success scripts" we use during the recruiting process as a way of increasing access to our programs (Badenhausen), former Berkeley professor Marilyn McEntyre has spoken eloquently about ten different ways we can help students reimagine success, ways that move beyond simple instrumentalist goals or terms tied to pleasing those in positions of authority, a particularly insidious virus that infects the lives of many of our students. McEntyre argues for strategies like reorienting students away from a narrative focused on winning things and celebrating those students who practice "downward mobility," or lives devoted to the service of others. The ultimate goal is to "help cultivate an academic culture and conversation that is more sustaining, life-giving, and conducive to lasting well-being" (2).

Honors can reinvigorate the fusty academy in a variety of other ways. We are well-situated in honors to partner with other campus programs on

shared faculty lines that stretch precious university budgets further. We have the environment, capacity, and pedagogical courage to experiment with alternative modes of assessment, like students' self-grading of their work, whose roots have been traced to feminist pedagogy by Portland State professor Vicki Reitenauer. We have seen thrilling experiments in Living Learning Communities that link universities directly to the neighborhoods they occupy, as in the honors LLC at Rutgers University-Newark led by its visionary dean, Tim Eatman. We are especially well-positioned to take up AAC&U's call for inclusive excellence and, in a related project, live up to NCHC Vice-President Suketu Bhavsar's call for us to situate our teaching on a foundation of compassion and empathy; as he writes in the 2020 Dallas conference Call for Papers, "nothing could be more *disruptive* or *transgressive* to our business as usual in the academy than deliberately, consciously, carefully, smartly, and habitually cultivating our hearts with intent, purpose, and humility."

Now is not the time for us in the honors community to be meek: colleges are closing; state support of higher education has fallen \$9 billion in the decade following the Great Recession (Mitchell, Leachman, and Materson); and we have national, state, and local politicians openly hostile to the value of college. In spite of the pressures around us, the work we do still matters enormously; we are altering the very trajectory of our students' lives. Honors itself has also matured as a field, and we have our own practices, traditions, and even foibles. In fact, if we tie our origins to Swarthmore College in 1922, we are on the verge of our hundred-year anniversary in honors. Let's celebrate that milestone by pledging to continue our thrilling, troublemaking project.

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