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# “Here’s the church, here’s the steeple”: Existing Politics of Honors Education

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**Abstract:** In considering the extent to which honors education should engage with political and social justice movements, the author argues that its programs must first reckon with their own histories and complicity within systems of domination and oppression before determining the best approach. This essay examines how the continued legacy of racialized tracking at the secondary level, as well as the exclusionary nature of collegiate honors programs, has often exacerbated inequalities for marginalized student populations. The author concludes with a call for honors practitioners to confront the history of honors education; to de-center honors in service learning and community engagement; and to listen to students left outside of honors about why they are not—or would not be—included in honors programs and colleges.

**Keywords:** racialized tracking; educational equalization; social justice; meritocracy; Perimeter College at Georgia State University (GA)—Honors College

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Sure, all men are created equal  
Here’s the church, here’s the steeple  
Please stay tuned, we cut to sequel  
Ashes to ashes, we all fall down

—R.E.M., “Bad Day” (2003)

When we recite truisms like “all men are created equal,” it is hard not to convey the deep sense of irony that Michael Stipe reveals in “Bad Day”: the disjunction between the abstraction and the lived reality of that aphorism. The triplicate crises of 2020—public health, social protest, and

dire economic straits—have brought our country’s inequalities into sharper and starker relief. As Christopher Keller points out in his essay “‘Mad and Educated, Primitive and Loyal,’” these crises present a set of challenges to honors education. As Keller indicates, we need to ask to what extent honors education should engage with political and social justice and with how much it should occupy or be occupied. These questions are fundamental to maintaining interest in and connection with the lived experience of our students just as the current crises are central to the development and sustainability of honors programs. While we may believe that honors can choose to engage with political and social justice, honors education has always and inevitably been deeply political. We may pledge ourselves to the idea that “all men are created equal,” but we are pantomiming a children’s game if we believe or act as though this statement were true in honors programs.

Honors programs in the United States have often created a de facto segregated system within an institution. At the secondary level, we recognize the obvious racial disparity in honors classrooms throughout the country. The system of racialized tracking created intra-school segregation and was “born from the resistance to the desegregation of schools by race” (Francis and Darity, Jr., 187). Racialized tracking not only creates disparities at the secondary level but often exacerbates them by funneling Black and brown students into remedial courses. Since *Brown v. Brown* mandated school integration, honors programs became a way to use racialized tracking to continue the “illegal practice of racial segregation . . . through legal means” (McCardle 12).

Collegiate honors programs are not immune from these forces. We inherit the system of racialized tracking from high schools, so students who apply to college honors programs are likely to be Asian or white and affluent. In “Creating a Profile of an Honors Student,” Andrew J. Cognard-Black and Art L. Spisak’s profile details a student with “a strong academic background in high school, drawn disproportionately from Asian, white, and higher socioeconomic family backgrounds, and motivated in some greater measure by the desire for status and prestige” (149). These honors students benefit from further privileges in honors programs—such as early registration, professional resources, and special lounges and rooms—that further isolate and insulate them from the general population left behind in segregated secondary honors programs. While collegiate honors programs do not have the specific history of segregation found in secondary honors programs, they remain embedded within the systemic racism of the university at large, as we can see, for instance, in how students are admitted into an honors college: via the front door (upon

admission); the side door (transfer student); or back door (identified by GPA during or after the first year of course work). In “Stratification with Honors,” Amy E. Stich argues that the three doors “sort and separate students within the Honors College, providing them with differential access to information, types of knowledge, financial supports, and engagement” (11).

Given that history, honors programs have always been deeply political. If we decide to rise to the occasion of the triple national crises that present themselves, I have three suggestions for thinking about the role of honors programs and honors education.

## **RECKON WITH THE HISTORY OF HONORS EDUCATION**

Honors programs and colleges, like many institutions affiliated with merit, hard work, or ability, have often been blind to the myth of meritocracy. Meritocracy has often served as a code word for racial, gender, sexual, and disabled exclusion. While honors programs and colleges may not have been racist, sexist, or oppressive in their intention, they are embedded in a series of oppressive systems and shaped by unexamined assumptions about merit.

To understand these assumptions, honors programs and colleges need to look not only at the history of their programs but at the field as a whole in order to revisit the conceptualization of honors education as a method of exclusion, often while proclaiming the importance of inclusion. For example, we know that honors education at a secondary level was based in and perpetuates racial and economic segregation, so we need to examine how collegiate honors responded and continues to respond to that fact, exacerbating the various disparities in high school honors by proclaiming themselves exclusively merit-based. This examination must be done before honors programs can determine what they can offer to political or social justice projects; our own house must be put in order first.

## **RESIST THE URGE TO CENTER HONORS EDUCATION**

Honors education is like Ahab in *Moby Dick*: everywhere it looks, it sees itself. Instead of asking the question “What can honors offer Black Lives Matter?,” we must focus on the question “What can honors learn from Black Lives Matter?” Honors needs to stop allowing itself the privileged position of knowledge that it has often been granted inside and outside of the academy. Privilege often blinds us to what is happening in political or social justice

spaces and to ways we can engage with these issues. Honors education should proceed not as a savior but as a student. University engagement, via service learning or community service, has often been colonialist in its approach: we have come here to offer our assistance, and we expect those we are serving to be grateful that we have decided to do so. All too often, community engagement focuses on the privileging of students, programs, or universities instead of viewing communities as partners in this process. We should take the time to learn from those engaged in social and political struggles and to use that knowledge in our classrooms and community.

## **LISTEN TO STUDENTS— ESPECIALLY THOSE NOT ADMITTED TO HONORS**

Finally, we should listen to our students, especially those who have not been admitted to honors. Admittance into honors programs, typically based on standardized testing, grades, AP classes, and letters of recommendations, is often a codification of white middle-class privileges and behaviors. When we hear our students of color say that their peers told them they were “acting white” by being an honors student, we should avoid a racist assumption that communities of color do not value academic success. Instead, we should understand, as sociologist Karolyn Tyson et al. point out, that such peer pressure only exists when racialized tracking itself exists in the school system (582). The codification of “honors-ness” as a set of privileged behaviors and assumptions excludes many potential honors students from even considering applying. We should revisit such lost conversations by asking students essential questions beyond “Why do you want to be an honors student?” instead asking “Why would you never consider being an honors student?” and “What are the barriers—internal to honors or to the university—that prevent you from thinking of yourself as an honors student?” Only then can honors determine how best to minimize or remove the barriers.

I will conclude by returning to R.E.M. and “Bad Day.” Irony reveals that we often say or believe things that we refuse to act on. We may believe in the democratic process and say we operate under systems of equality and equity, but if we erect barriers to entry—or pretend such barriers do not exist—then we do not really believe in such vaunted values. If honors is honest about its political history and its desire to move forward in the full spirit of equality and equity, the current crises present an opportunity to begin anew.

Two brief examples reveal how I am thinking about these issues at my institution. I am one of the coordinators of the GSU Prison Education Project, which offers college courses to incarcerated men and women throughout the state. Currently, I am working to offer honors classes to these students as part of a pilot program. My students at the prison are far from traditional honors students; however, their GPAs are higher than the average among honors students at my institution, and their coursework is often at the upper-division or graduate level in depth and complexity. Barriers prevent them from being honors students just as other barriers exclude many potential honors students.

Another area I would like to work on is accessibility. Honors education has often codified and embedded ableism in our courses from the workload to how we teach. I have had numerous students in my classes who were light years ahead of other students in the class but who had social anxiety or exhibited behaviors that are not typical of the average honors student. I would like to work on welcoming more of these students as honors students by providing a more inclusive and welcoming environment in which the concept of “normal” does not exist and the exceptional is always possible.

Honors, like much of higher education, is always at a crossroads. We are always under threat from budget cuts, calls for career-based education, and politicalized pressure from state and local governments. We should not use this threat as an opportunity to close our borders. Our students are living, working, learning, and dying; we cannot, in this time of triple crises, let them down. For honors to be relevant, it must engage honestly in the difficult political work that is required in a democratic institution like a university. Otherwise, we are showing our students the church and steeple, but with the *demons* inside missing or silent.

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