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Honors the Hard Way

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Abstract: The conventional structure of most honors colleges made it difficult to deliver curricula and programming during the global health pandemic. Traditional modalities for content delivery and community building did not always adapt well to online environments. By requiring that honors students come to campus, programs have been offering a brick-and-mortar education to prepare their students for a virtual workplace. Instead of clinging to what has now become obsolete or cost prohibitive, honors practitioners must think creatively about what honors education in virtual reality might look like. The author suggests a reallocation of resources from physical to virtual spaces and argues that virtual communities make honors more affordable to a wider cross-section of students. Transcending the physical makes post-pandemic honors more democratic and can widen the circle of inclusion to make honors programs more diverse as well.

The Plague Year has changed American higher education forever. Call it a watershed moment, or a tipping point, or a black swan, the global pandemic focused attention with laser accuracy on the value and limits of knowledge in the fast-moving, global civilization to which our magical technologies have brought us. The spread of COVID-19 in a matter of months brought a nineteenth-century terror into a twenty-first-century world with cataclysmic vengeance. A century of medical advances that had helped us cure diseases were useless against one about which we knew nothing because we lacked data. We were powerless without the information necessary to create a vaccine. Humans can accelerate with decentralization and collaboration,

but nature cannot be rushed. We found ourselves in a maelstrom of excess information with limited visibility and no path through it because there was no existing knowledge. Wicked problems demand complex, interdisciplinary solutions. They need the most imaginative minds, the most elastic and innovative thinkers, collaborating to solve them. Just to live in this world, all college students now need an education that stretches them to think beyond their reach, in other words—an honors education. Honors students need such an education most of all because they are the ones to whom we will turn to solve the problems.

But what should a post-pandemic honors education look like? François G. Amar craves a "return to normalcy," but what is "normal"—consistent with our expectations? average or typical? within two standard deviations? The pandemic made it difficult to deliver honors as we have always done it. After we have been thrust out of the cave into the blinding light, we are tempted to feel overwhelmed and want to scurry right back in. But what if the pandemic was an augury, a meteor strike, an apocalyptic flood bringing with it an opportunity for epiphany? What if "normal" isn't good enough anymore? What if a paradigm shift is in order? What if the narrative here is that the old world of honors must be reborn as something new and different before it is able to incorporate the "core values . . . such as diversity, community, student agency, and inclusive excellence"?

Amar characterizes honors as "imperiled," and he is not wrong. The year 2020 showed that the ways honors programs have been conventionally structured does not transplant well to online environments, but that does not mean we should be looking back with nostalgia to the old paradigm as we move ahead into the twenty-first century. We honors types are a bit prone to self-serving bias when we take credit for the transformative successes of our honors programs but ascribe their failures to outside circumstances such as underfunding, hostile legislatures or administrators, or resistance from non-honors faculty. We need to ask ourselves what honors must do to survive now that the world has profoundly changed.

If we are to reimagine ourselves going forward, we would do well to listen to why students turn us down or drop out—or ask them why they never apply in the first place. We need to ask ourselves if we are molding and adapting students to the expectations of our honors program or if we are molding and adapting our program to boost and nurture students' expectations for themselves. Making products is easier; breathing life into individuals is harder, but it nourishes agency and self-efficacy, so if that is what we seek, we need to

interrogate our own best practices to see why some of them do not seem likely to survive the voyage to the new digital world of higher education. Instead of clinging to what has now become obsolete or too costly, however beloved, we may need to find new kinds of "activities" that, as the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) website claims in its definition of honors, "are measurably broader, deeper, and more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education." We need to accept Amar's challenge to find "ways in which the communicative and collaborative technologies that helped sustain higher education during the coronavirus crisis can be marshaled to enhance intra- and inter-institutional collaborations in teaching, learning, and research to benefit students and faculty alike."

Ours is a digital age, yet our traditions are anchored in our special places: honors classrooms, honors residence halls, directors' offices, honors lounges, and study rooms. Most honors faculty and students would agree with Amar that "[o]ne of the big challenges for honors during the pandemic has been creating community while losing a sense of place." But not every "place" is material. Students live in many virtual communities: social media platforms, MMOs, family phone circles, chatrooms, and virtual worlds populated entirely by avatars. They are comfortable in places where faculty may not yet be. As they see it, a virtual world is not a poor substitute for the other; rather, each exists where the other cannot. They are complementary. But honors programs and colleges have their resources and expertise invested in a college experience that is place-dependent. We are giving students brick-and-mortar preparation for what is already becoming a virtual workplace. We should be thinking about what honors in virtual reality should look like.

This pandemic moment might be a tipping point for examining whether a little reimagining with new technologies might help us come closer to attaining greater diversity and better inclusion. If we want a diverse array of students to feel included in honors, it is counterintuitive to exclude them, especially pre-emptively with admissions policies that set criteria more accurately predicted by zip code than by intellectual merit. Honors programs have never, in fact, been diverse or inclusive. They extend to a chosen group an invitation to a cruise on a privileged aircraft to a serious of preselected destinations that are better than the destinations available to their fellow students in coach. However, to get this first-class ticket, they must demonstrate that they are excellent at doing what others want them to do; since secondary education does not really reward intellectual imagination, it is not surprising that students don't

expect much agency in choosing the courses that will constitute the beginning of their college education. Although honors programs do give students intellectual agency in the classroom, most also demand that, to continue to have access to such classes, they must maintain the same level of achievement in college as in high school. Their grades in all courses, not just honors courses, must be superior. Amar contends that "honors is a community of opportunity [that] brings together a diverse body of motivated students and innovative faculty to create an environment in which students are challenged to take initiative and develop agency," but students may see honors differently if the only way to do undergraduate research is to work in a faculty member's lab on a project that you did not originate or if you must avoid the more challenging courses to keep your GPA high enough for graduate school.

One of the ways that the traditional model of a well-designed honors program is rigid is that, to experience it, you must come to it: we cannot bring it to you. Honors classes, community-building activities, enrichment events, trips, and conferences—all depend on the participants' physical presence on site. To study abroad, you must go abroad. To do Partners in the Parks, you must be able to travel. These amenities have never been available to our honors students at the University of Baltimore because our students have jobs and families. They must pay their own way through school, or their employers must, so they may have to choose between an honors event at the university or Back-to-School night. If acceptance into an honors program means they will have to take a common core of classes at the same time everyone else in the program is taking them because they are only offered once, students must decline to be in the program at all. We have offered an honors experience tailored to these students for forty years, as have community colleges, but only now are they beginning to enter flagship universities in significant enough numbers that the problems cited in "Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory and Practice of Inclusion" (Badenhausen, Buss, et al., 2021) have become apparent.

When the pandemic made it impossible for universities to offer any classes in person, a whole new world opened ways for our students to attend class, and our attendance went up. Students came to class on their phones from Panera Bread or from their living rooms, their hospital rooms, their cars, or their desks at work. The attendance at the Maryland Collegiate Honors Council's virtual conference in 2021 had more than double its best attendance ever because the pandemic forced us to take the conference to them via Zoom rather than insist that everyone take the day off from work

and from class to drive to the university, which might be close by or three hours away. We had struggled for years with students coming only to make their presentations and going home without taking advantage of the conference. On Zoom, everyone came and stayed. We never want to give up this circle of inclusion.

Honors programs are rarely diverse because they are usually not inclusive. They were conceived for traditional-age students who live on campus or nearby and do not have full-time jobs or families who present competing demands on their time. Such students correctly perceived that their intellectual gifts would allow them to manage a regular load and stand out as achievers but also that the demands on their time would not be too great a burden. Enrollment in our programs thus mirrors the kinds of students they have been designed to attract. Ironically, given the cost of higher education, this model of enriched learning for students who have nothing to do but go to school is out of date even for our own traditional population. Almost all college students these days have jobs or family obligations. While intellectual gifts and intrinsic motivation are distributed randomly across all demographic groups, what some have and others do not are money and time; we can make ourselves more inclusive by reimagining our programs so that they don't require these advantages.

Financing honors programs is always a struggle because enrichment costs money. Someone has to pay for the small classes, the faculty time for undergraduate research, and the extracurricular programs, and universities are chary of the cost of honors because they do not always see the value. Inevitably, some of the cost falls to the students themselves in the form of scholarships for which they must maintain a certain GPA or service to the program in its ceaseless quest for outside funding. The cost of preparing to enter an honors program falls to the students' families before they even arrive: a house in a more expensive neighborhood with better schools, test preparation classes and multiple standardized tests, enrichment programs at the secondary level. Amar is quite right in assuming that we will probably now need to make do with less, but we could also respond to the pandemic by rethinking our expensive model, making it less costly and perhaps more inclusive in the process.

I teach a course every semester in the Rhetoric of Digital Communication: I taught it through the 2016 and 2018 election cycles, two presidential impeachments, the Kavanaugh hearings, the deaths of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and George Floyd, the trial of Derek Chauvin, and the pandemic. No textbook

was required: the primary material on the internet provided enough source material for a lifetime, and Aristotle and Cicero are in the public domain. Every speech imaginable is on YouTube, including Sam Waterston as Lincoln and Alfré Woodard or Cicely Tyson as Sojourner Truth. Our own City as Text™ is free, and you don't need high test scores to do it in ways that are unquestionably deeper, broader, and more complex than anything you will learn in a lecture hall. City as Text works anywhere: When it first came out, I had our students read *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and then sent them out to Turner Station and Dundalk and Hopkins Hospital and Crownsville to visit the places where she had lived and died, take pictures, interview the residents, and develop a Henrietta Lacks museum.

We tell the University of Baltimore students that the city is their classroom, and something like that is true for every institution. Honors programs work best when they are built from the ground up based on the best practices of the home institution, its mission and vision, and the needs and goals of its own population rather than imported from another institution and expected to fit. The NCHC teaches best practices in the design of honors programs, but we also recognize that a program designed for an R1 flagship institution may not work for a branch campus of that same university with a history as an HBC. Crafting honors programs from scratch that build on the strengths of their own institutions takes work, but such programs are more likely to endure than those with designs that came off the rack, and they will resist destruction by a pandemic or any other natural disaster because their students are stakeholders, not just customers. A campus's honors program should match its landscape, both physical and virtual, because that landscape must be its culture. A sense of belonging to the culture will build and sustain community better than the transitory occupation of common space. Social media have allowed us to reach out early to prospective students and stay in touch with alumni and have been a lifeline to students who were isolated or banished during the pandemic. Electronic communities should not be shelved now that the crisis has abated but should be nurtured so they can continue until and after graduation.

We can spend money on technology that we are now spending on buildings and overhead. Facebook Workplace is already available (I am beta-testing it in a class this semester), and it will tell us whether the way students are treated changes if the instructor and other students don't know one another's age, gender, ethnicity, hairstyle, clothing preferences, or anything but the inside of their minds. Corporations are already moving aggressively toward

virtual space as a cost-cutting measure, and Amar is no doubt right that some universities will be following suit. If honors programs can show universities that they can have a thriving cyberspace community at no cost, they can be the innovators in preparing students for the workspace they are about to enter. Software designed originally to permit virtual meetings in corporations has improved so radically with the infusion of cash from desperate organizations, including universities, that two years after tiptoeing onto Zoom, we can now have students zoom into an in-person class that is being livestreamed through its projector. Economies of scale now allow software companies to sell licenses for Zoom™, WebEx™, and Teams™ at prices affordable even to cash-poor colleges and universities.

Like every other strategy that meets honors students where they are rather than forcing them to make pilgrimages to a sacred space, online adaptations will broaden our reach and make us more attractive to a wider assortment of highly motivated students who need honors to be accessible. The answer to Ada Long's question—"Will the technologies that have been thrust upon all educators and students be a threat to future learning or a doorway into enriched educational options?"—is this: they will be what we choose them to be. We can see them as portals into a new world of honors education that is more democratic and pluralistic and where our students have already begun to live, or we can choose to play "Nearer, My God, to Thee" (exquisitely) and go down with the Titani*c*.

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