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Bordering on Normal: Dissolving Honors Boundaries

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Abstract: First-year students faced unprecedented challenges while transitioning from high school to university in fall 2020. The coronavirus crisis, economic downturn, social unrest, and a rapid and massive shift to remote learning altered their world in fundamental ways. This essay describes the response of one honors program toward providing extra- and co-curricular opportunities for student engagement with contemporary issues affecting the local community. While keeping the events of the world in view, the author demonstrates a virtual building of campus community. Pedagogical tools, such as service learning, complement a technological infrastructure for supporting colloquial inquiry and confronting social inequity, and they create common ground to help students shape a new post-pandemic “normal” from which to thrive.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; student-centered learning; virtual classrooms; study and teaching of racism; University of Nebraska, Omaha (NE)—Honors Program

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“I am tired of living through history: I want just one normal day.” For first-year honors students starting their university careers in fall 2020, such a sentiment in spring 2021 should not surprise us. As Christopher Keller points out, between completing high school and starting college, these students have witnessed a pandemic, economic downturn, and civil rights unrest unprecedented in their lifetimes—along with, most recently, an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. They lost their end of high school and many of the expected experiences at the start of a university career. As these students learn on Zoom and online, with very limited in-person interactions, normality

holds more appeal with each day of isolation. Our first-year students are still straddling their high school identities and the selves they hope to assume more fully as college students; all our students have been liminal this past year. The same argument could be made about first-year students starting at a university without a pandemic—the first year of college is always a time of transition—but if COVID weren't enough, the social unrest last summer was another challenge for this year's first-year students and for all students. Such moments of change offer opportunities to think through the desired normal to which we should return as the threat of the pandemic diminishes.

What is vital is to have a normal that is new. Perhaps the ongoing viral threat will necessitate public health and societal changes for more months than many of us might wish. These physical and health concerns may also have lasting ramifications for how honors educators think about accessibility, equity, and ways our teaching can and should reach our students. At the same time, facets of honors treasured so long—small discussion-based classes, for instance—should be even more attractive to students for whom Zoom or online learning has been a test of their endurance and persistence.

Issues of access have already shifted over the last year—and earlier. While there may still be limits on entrance admission requirements, recently programs have reduced their dependence upon such standardized discriminations. At the University of Nebraska at Omaha, for instance, the ACT score was not such a factor in general admission decisions this last year but in honors had been removed as a barrier to admission five years ago. Admissions decisions in our honors program are holistic, so the standardized test score is not abandoned entirely but for years has not served as the wall between in or out. De-emphasizing the value of the ACT in honors shifted our predominantly local Nebraskan entering class's identity, yet it still does not reflect the larger city's ethnic diversity as much as it might or should. We are still striving toward that normal, and as we do, honors has had to respond to changes in the world around us.

Keller asks what obligation honors has to respond to activist movements and moments, but I posit that the core of honors, with its focus on enhancing educational experiences, has always trafficked in such liminalities. The 2020 summer of social unrest was the flashpoint of years of injustice and prejudice, shattering illusions of equality and creating an imperative for change. That change cannot be effected without engagement across long-established borders, artificially erected and maintained, like deciding futures or identity by standardized tests and excluding activism from academia. Honors promotes

multi- and inter-disciplinary classes and pedagogical approaches; embracing the possibility of expanding conversations is vital for this generation of students particularly. They are living history, and we need them to make the new normal that can and should await them.

Our honors program has thus strived not only to tear down the ACT wall but also to engage in activities and curricula that encourage student engagement in contemporary issues. Honors can and should thus serve as a forum for exploring ongoing events. To do so is a political act, but the act of providing space and opportunities to engage does not necessarily require honors to take a political position of its own, one that may not mesh with the larger institution's mission or stance. Rather honors can serve civic and intellectual development by offering educational opportunities to students to consider and further their own political understanding and beliefs.

In that spirit, we welcomed our students to campus last summer (2020) before they began classes in the fall. Seizing on the evolving conversations, we shared the film *Just Mercy* (2019), made widely and freely available by its studio and thus accessible to all. (Bryan Stevenson's book, on which the movie was based, had been selected as our Common Reader for incoming students, but that program fell victim to the pandemic.) Students were invited to watch the movie and then gather with already enrolled students and honors faculty on Zoom for conversations about the topics it evoked. Nearly half of our incoming class joined us that summer evening on Zoom—maybe because they had had a break from high school Zoom, maybe because they thought they should make a good first impression, maybe because they were seeking community. Their reason for attendance does not really matter; the couple of hours chatting on Zoom showed them the possibilities for engagement in college life and the shifted relationship between students, peers, and professors away from the teacher-student relationship of high school. Those couple of hours invited them to change and to shape honors.

Such efforts this academic year to engage our students in conversations that matter have continued: they include formation of a first-year council of students; initiation of volunteer community activities making cards and hats for larger Omaha community citizens in need; creation of Zoom Kahoot! nights; and most recently a Black History month event, watching a TED talk about art and its prejudices led by art history faculty. Conversations with fellow honors educators have shown me that other programs have been similarly invested in trying to keep honors real even while we are mostly virtual. In our honors program, we have kept events in the world in view as we have tried,

virtually, to build our community. Not all of our efforts have worked, but all have been efforts to cross borders, to reach our students, and to highlight dissonances in the living history to which our students are witnesses. Such illumination is essential to serving honors students' development as engaged citizens.

Omaha, Nebraska, might not be a focal point in terms of the country's race issues, but unfortunately this urban environment has had its fair share of dreadful incidents. Such ugly history re-emerged last summer when James Scurlock was shot by bar owner Jake Gardner in Omaha just five days after George Floyd's death. City-wide curfews were imposed, and tempers were high as protests downtown persisted. Gardner was initially not charged by the county attorney, but that swift decision was overturned several months later by a grand jury. This event was not, of course, Omaha's first nor only instance of racial injustice. In 1919, a white mob lynched Will Brown, an African American man falsely accused of assaulting a white woman. The mob seized the prisoner from jail and hung him before desecrating and burning his body, dragging him through the streets. The white mayor at the time pleaded for peace, and he had himself to be rescued from the mob violence. In the fall of 2019, the city recognized the hundred-year anniversary of this racially charged act with a Community Remembrance Ceremony, among other events designed to end the city's silence and to open community conversations about race.

Omaha remains a very segregated city. Redlining ensured that racial barriers would affect the population's development, and that segregation has persisted into the twenty-first century. Our university's Service Learning Academy has recently centered efforts on addressing redlining in the city, and several honors classes have explored the topic over the last few years. Awareness of such racial disparities is increasing among our incoming students, but the events and protests of summer 2020 brought them home as stark reality. Students were ready to engage and open to exploring when we came together on Zoom last summer, and they are more open to such topics because of the history they are witnessing. With their high school experience colored by the nationalist rhetoric that was then on the rise across the country, they are starting their college experiences with an end of the pandemic in sight and the promise of a new normal in their grasp. We must help them reach it, and only by engaging with the history and present of racial inequities that they are now witnessing can we equip them to bring positive change.

Honors education has a responsibility to rise to occasions as they present themselves. Given honors' interest in shaping the leaders of tomorrow and stretching our students' critical thinking and engagement skills, we cannot conduct their education in isolation from reality. Honors must straddle borders and break them down, whether through adjusting admissions policies or actively engaging in contemporary moments that evince change. Honors does have a responsibility, in educating our campuses' most intellectually gifted students, to engage them in the current and ongoing debates raging on and beyond our campuses. Honors should thus be political in confronting inequity and in providing the space, forum, and possibilities for change.

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