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# Business as Unusual: Honors and Post-Pandemic Gen Z

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**Abstract:** Honors is unusual not because it is elitist or exclusionary but because it responds directly, thoughtfully, and creatively to the needs and concerns of each new cohort of students. The present generation of college students expects their institutions to deliver clear value, rich diversity, and positive career outcomes; and these changes demand a better business model in higher education. This essay suggests that, too often, institutions confuse a better business model with cutting costs, a confusion that both threatens honors education and undercuts institutional integrity. A better and more sustainable approach is to define, articulate, and deliver the value of higher education to all students, and thereby justify and advocate for its necessary costs. At a time when much of higher education seeks to move past the pandemic and return to normal, honors educators can and should help reframe conversations about programmatic and institutional survival by defining and arguing for a *business-as-unusual* approach. Building on the creative approaches that honors programs and colleges have taken to engage students during the pandemic, the author explores how honors educators can help their institutions prepare all students for an increasingly uncertain future.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic; educational change; Generation Z; Utah State University (UT)–Honors Program

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One mustn't refuse the unusual, if it is offered to one.

—Agatha Christie, *Passenger to Frankfurt*

Honors education is unusual by definition: its “measurably broader, deeper, or more complex” learning experiences have long challenged the

pedagogical and administrative norms of postsecondary education (“Definition”). With the Delta variant’s surge as we enter the pandemic’s second year, the “hope that we’re going to go back to where we were” in higher education—that we can return to business as usual—seems increasingly like “wishful thinking” (Fischer 22). The pandemic challenges that François G. Amar identifies in the Forum’s lead essay—community-building, local and global student engagement, research and creative opportunity, equity and inclusion, and budgetary pressure—face not only honors but all of higher education, and Amar’s call for clarity about “the values of honors and its value proposition for college students, for faculty, and for their institutions” (2) echoes the national call for clarity about the value of postsecondary education. At a time when business as usual is no longer a viable option, the honors approach to business as *unusual* can help define the value and impact of higher education.

National demand for such definition is growing. As part of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*’s 2020 report on *The Post-Pandemic College*, Rick Staisloff contends in “Business Models” that “higher education is no longer simply being asked to change. Change will be forced on it” because “accumulated decades of inattention to costs and the lack of return on investment for students, colleges, and states have revealed the unsustainability of the business model” (45). Karin Fischer’s essay on “The Student Experience” grounds this post-pandemic prediction in the values of Gen Z, the current generation of students born between 1995 and 2010: “Gen Z will question the return on investment and look for college to become a better bridge to work” and to deliver a set of marketable credentials as efficiently and inexpensively as possible (23). Jeffrey J. Selingo’s more recent report for *The Chronicle* on *The Future of Gen Z* (2021) explains what this positive “return on investment” might look like by examining pandemic and post-pandemic education through the lens of student focus groups. In Selingo’s groups, 82% of students said they now believe that “safety, well-being, and inclusion are as important as academic rigor” in higher education (18). These students quite clearly define what they hope they will get out of their investment in higher education: they not only expect colleges and universities to prepare them for the future by “making better connections between what they’re learning in the moment and how they will use that learning after graduation” (28), but they also “see themselves as agents of change” and expect higher education to support their efforts to make a difference on “issues like racial justice, climate change, and social mobility” (25). Overall, the report suggests that Gen Z and their families expect higher education to 1) deliver value in both classroom

and co-curricular experiences, 2) support diversity with specific and targeted programs, and 3) ensure positive outcomes for graduates in an uncertain job market (30). Higher education's business model will remain unsustainable, as Staisloff and Fischer suggest, until institutions align their financial, pedagogical, and student-services resources with these expectations.

Research has shown that honors education regularly delivers on such expectations by giving students the opportunity to maximize learning, the resources to act for the common good, and the guidance and support to develop personally and professionally. Published just before the pandemic, *The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education* offers data to support these value assertions by applying "a variety of different methods and exploring a variety of different outcomes" at "a diversity of institutions and institution types" (Cognard-Black 10). Even allowing for the fact that honors students "tend to start college in a stronger position in terms of academic preparation," Andrew J. Cognard-Black concludes that the "results presented in this volume are a forceful answer to the question of whether honors adds value, and the evidence indicates that the answer to the question is yes" (10). Putting this discussion of value into the context of the pandemic, the "Big Hearts, Big Minds" Forum in the fall 2020 issue of the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* "addresses the ideals of honors education and starts [. . .] to assess how these ideals can survive or even thrive in the new landscape of the virus" (Long ix). Including essays on the responsibility of the "compassionate educator" (Bhavsar) and the whole honors student (Coleman and Dotter) to model compassionate education (Hartup) and social justice (Gill) across campus, the Forum initiates a conversation about how honors programs and colleges can and do respond directly and meaningfully to Gen Z's growing concern that undergraduate education deliver value, diversity, and positive career outcomes.

This kind of response is both unusual and necessary in higher education today. Amar is right to assert in his lead essay that "[d]oubling down on the core values of honors, such as diversity, community, student agency, and inclusive excellence, will help programs define and articulate their worth in this new environment" and thus make the case for continued institutional support of honors education. However, because the "perils for honors" in the post-pandemic era extend well beyond honors itself, I would argue that his call for "collaborations within and across our institutions" is crucial. The best way to preserve honors education is to work with others on our campuses to make the case that higher education delivers to all students clear educational

value, deep engagement with a diverse community, and marked pathways to the future. Recognizing the mismatch between the brevity of a Forum response and the gravity of this situation in higher education, I do not mean to suggest that honors has all the answers. Rather, I argue that honors education is unusual in all the right ways for our current time and that, as Agatha Christie warns, “One mustn’t refuse the unusual, if it is offered to one” (10). At a time when much of higher education is trying to return to normal, honors programs and colleges can help reframe conversations about our own and our institutions’ survival by defining and arguing for a business-as-*unusual* approach to higher education. I offer in the following pages a few ideas from my own institution, Utah State University (USU), to illustrate how this work might begin.

I should open this discussion by acknowledging the difficulty of pedagogical innovation and institutional collaboration, especially during a pandemic. On a very basic level, honors educators can and should continue to explore approaches to the high-impact pedagogical practices articulated and promoted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), a set of standards that many institutions share with their honors programs and colleges (“High-Impact”). However, the pandemic has increased the challenges of both engaging in such high-impact pedagogy and transforming honors blueprints for courses and programming into the large-scale structures that serve all students. Our current circumstances have demanded a focus on the local, a commitment to continue educating honors students as usual, even if that “usual” has become something of an approximation. At USU, a state land-grant research institution, the honors program has doubled down, as Amar suggests we should, on the value of an honors education, emphasizing how honors students benefit from guided reflection on their educational experiences throughout our curriculum, particularly given the often disparate, disconnected experience of the pandemic. However, a closer look at how honors students share these benefits with their communities can teach us as honors educators a great deal about serving our institutions more broadly. For example, as students in USU’s Honors Leadership Academy have practiced specific skills in the areas of ambassadorship, publicity, peer education, and community-building over the past year, they have been both eager and prepared to apply those skills for the common good at the programmatic, institutional, and national levels. Like our students, we as honors educators can increase our impact as leaders at and beyond our institutions only if we are willing to extend our immediate concerns and responsibilities into our

work as the institutional ambassadors, publicists, peer educators, and community-builders that our colleges and universities need both during and after this pandemic.

Although bringing honors voices into crucial institutional and national conversations is often challenging, we can begin this work strategically with both programming to increase the public visibility of honors and partnerships to support high-impact educational practices for all. At USU, for example, a new *Honors Cares* series focuses on well-being and community-building in and beyond the honors program. The series places the honors community visibly at the heart of our campus community through public stress-reduction activities, such as outdoor, professionally run “puppy parties,” regular honors hikes in the mountains surrounding our institution, and even honors physical education courses focused on world dance, strength and conditioning, and yoga. Of particular note in this series is our weekly Honors Laughter Practice, which meets outdoors on the central campus quad to practice “laughter yoga,” a guided exercise focused on breathing and laughter as community-building and stress-reduction tools. We invite all students, faculty, and staff to join this activity, with the goal of contributing to campus well-being and challenging misled assumptions about the exclusivity of honors education. In addition to partnering with a range of other USU units (including all academic colleges and departments and most student-services offices), the USU Honors Program regularly foregrounds its central place in our institution by making honors programming as visible and accessible as possible and looking for the types of cross-campus collaborative opportunities that Amar mentions.

The potential impact of honors on institutional direction has perhaps become most clear in the area of admissions over the course of the pandemic. Amar cites the National Collegiate Honors Council’s (NCHC) recently published position paper on enrollment management, which argues for making honors as inclusive as it is engaging and for cultivating not just academic talent but student capacity for growth-mindset learning (“Honors Enrollment Management”). Despite pandemic challenges, many honors programs and colleges have worked hard to continue building diverse, inclusive student communities, both virtually and in person. As *The Chronicle* indicates, members of Gen Z tend to believe in inclusion and are eager to contribute to the common good, and honors regularly prepares students for such work (*Post-Pandemic College*). At USU, for example, we involve advanced honors students in our holistic admissions review; feature courses and small, cross-disciplinary, faculty-led reading groups (“Honors Book Labs”) on topics

related to inclusion, equity, climate change, and other contemporary challenges; and offer upstander training and regular practice in civil discourse.

More expansively, as the NCHC position paper also suggests, honors educators can work with other institutional leaders to help shape policies and initiatives that empower all students. In my role as honors director here at USU, I serve on many university-wide working groups, including the placement exam task force and the committee for equity and inclusion. Also, honors faculty share inclusive pedagogical ideas and strategies from their honors courses and Book Labs at local and national teaching workshops. Such broad collaborative work on equity and inclusion leads to the institutional and national changes in admissions, curriculum, and student services that contemporary students both expect and need.

By preparing students to act for the common good and helping them to understand the value and impact of an undergraduate education, colleges and universities can lay the groundwork for positive post-graduation outcomes even in uncertain times. Once again, honors professional-development programs are unusual in their authentic, proactive response to the needs and concerns of Gen Z students and in their recognition that undergraduates who understand the value of their personal and professional development—including their growth as change agents—can envision their next steps and lead others to embrace that vision. At USU, for example, honors students prepare thoughtfully and intentionally for the future by participating in virtual or in-person internships for honors credit; honors alumni mentoring engages current students and alumni in conversations about professional development and the value of honors; and *The Honors Passion Project*, a monthly Zoom series features the quirky passions and hobbies of our alumni. Both student reflections and alumni feedback suggest that these initiatives improve understanding of the lasting value of an undergraduate education, and the USU Honors Program has thus broadened its institutional impact by developing and sharing best practices for virtual alumni engagement and hybrid approaches to student professional development with our institution's alumni-relations and advancement teams. We hope in the coming year to collaborate with USU's newly renovated career development center, sharing honors professional-development programming and curriculum with students across the institution as a whole and thus turning honors business as unusual into an institutional norm.

The pandemic is not over, making it both difficult and dangerous to predict the educational landscape of the post-pandemic world. What seems clear to me in this unstable moment is that the business of higher education is no



longer running as usual, and honors can offer real, unusual answers to the pressing question of how best to prepare our students for the future. Honors is unusual not because it is elitist or exclusionary but because it responds directly, thoughtfully, and creatively to the needs and concerns of each new cohort of students. Too often institutions of higher education react to calls for a better business model by cutting costs and reducing value with cheap credentials and easy paths to a degree. A better—and more sustainable—approach is to define, articulate, and deliver the value of higher education to all students and thus to justify and advocate for its necessary costs. Because honors educators are both individually and collectively experienced in this work, we have a responsibility to help ground institutional visions for the future of higher education. A newly released NCHC honors advocacy toolkit helps programs and colleges make the case that honors can and should play this central, collaborative role in defining post-pandemic institutional priorities, plans, and actions. Building on the creative approaches that our honors programs and colleges have taken to engage students during the pandemic, we can now help our institutions to question a return to business as usual and to prepare all students for what looks like an increasingly uncertain future.

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