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“Help, I Need Somebody”: Rethinking How We Conceptualize Honors

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The very morning I received the *JNCHC* announcement of an issue devoted to honors students in trouble, I met with the mother of a freshman honors student who had threatened that weekend to kill herself. The parent, who had flown over two thousand miles to our campus, was predictably upset and the student demoralized. After individual conversations with each party, during which we decided the best course of action for the student would be to leave honors, I listened to this young lady make the courageous admission that she had never wanted to join the honors program but did so only to please her parents. Other honors students this year have struggled through brutal conflicts with family members, homesickness, substance abuse, computer addiction, and severe motivation problems without resolving the issues successfully.

I found myself wondering about the causes of these painful misfortunes and, in particular, why these students didn't ask for help or only sought assistance when it was essentially too late to dig out of what had become very deep holes. Why is it *so hard* for honors students to ask for help? They have always been told they are the best and the brightest, able to leap tall (academic) buildings in a single bound, but such messages may well be part of the problem.

Jack Dudley is no doubt right in his lead essay that our current economic, social, and political problems have intensified the challenges for all college students. My own sense is that these crises have turned what were merely cracks in the foundations of many family structures into wide, gaping crevasses; job losses, bankruptcies, divorce, and calamitous interactions with our country's healthcare "system" are part of the everyday fabric of our students' lives. Yet the effects of such material circumstances, so visible and tangible and capable of being comfortably fit into narratives of struggle and failure, are exacerbated by the way in which many honors students are encouraged to see and define themselves and by the manner in which they internalize those messages. I see very specific reasons why honors students resist our

“HELP, I NEED SOMEBODY”

support, and we as honors educators can take particular steps to make that “helping project” more palatable and successful for those we teach.

The first challenge honors students face in asking for help is the fact that their self-concept is so grounded in the idea of academic achievement that seeking assistance calls their very identity into question. Asking for help becomes an attack on the notion of a successful self. For such students, soliciting help on an academic matter seems a sign of weakness or even failure; they have seen others seek help throughout their schooling, but they have not associated themselves with that class of students. While many honors students intuitively understand when they need help and recognize that mentors are ready to provide support, the shame associated with the activity overwhelms the intellectual realization that they must act to save themselves. The very word “honors” complicates matters because the origins of the term emphasize respect, fame, glory, esteem, and reputation, which are special privileges bestowed by others. To exhibit vulnerability is to risk losing that externally granted status. A related crisis occurs when such students, accustomed to receiving praise in high school for uncovering and then delivering “what the teacher wants,” are told in college to take risks, think for themselves, and cultivate their own voices; the sudden apparent lack of external criteria to determine self-worth is frightening and can leave them at a loss.

A second reason our honors students don’t ask for help is that many of them simply don’t know how. Most high schools have not created opportunities for high-achieving students to seek assistance. The testing/accountability movement of the past ten years has promoted rote learning environments that discourage high-level student-teacher interaction. In addition, students who have grown up in professional, middle-class households have often not been given the chance to develop and practice coping skills because of overly involved parents ready to solve problems at a moment’s notice. Studies have documented the severe damage done to children when they are raised with the knowledge that any difficulty they encounter will be solved with a mere phone call or text to mom and dad. Two of the better recent examinations of the culture of hyper-parenting—Carl Honoré’s *Under Pressure: Rescuing Our Children from the Culture of Hyper-Parenting* and Madeline Levine’s *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating A Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*—detail this phenomenon.

Honors students from underrepresented groups face a different dilemma as they enter the unfamiliar world of academia, a place with its own arcane conventions and terminology controlled by people in positions of power who don’t resemble them in any way. Such students can resort to what Mary Goldberger calls a “strategic silence.” While they may be thoroughly engaged

in the academic project at hand, these individuals have willfully and strategically adopted a “defensive posture of passivity and silence out of fear and threat” (346) given their past experiences in new environments where others unlike them are in dominant positions. For such students, asking for help requires an amount of courage that would be hard for anyone, let alone a teenager, to muster.

Finally, the culture of honors programs can impede the helping project if its ethos celebrates competition and individual academic achievement excessively. Most of us probably seek to cultivate independence among students and equate excellence with an ability to work alone. Yet, as therapist Madeline Levine has pointed out, in such cases where students feel that it is “every man for himself” and “one child’s disadvantage becomes another child’s advantage,” members of that community are going to “feel unsupported and wary of each other” (189). (Imagine how grading curves embody this sensibility.) I often wonder, as my first-year honors students devote their initial weeks of college to reading about individual heroic exploits in *The Odyssey*, whether we are sending mixed messages when we have just spent the previous orientation week discussing the importance of community. Odysseus certainly didn’t need to depend on his fellow soldiers during his pursuit of *areté* and *kleos*, except when he required someone to tie him to the mast of his ship.

Many academics struggle to understand why some of our brightest students engage in self-defeating behavior like substance abuse, dangerous sexual practices, and other risky conduct. My thesis is that such activity is often a student’s attempt to act out the need for help—to signal it physically—in the face of the challenges mentioned above. Because many honors students have been on display throughout their lives, their identity is often tied up in the act of being looked at and singled out. They have been differentiated from classmates as positive exemplars by their teachers and parents, placed in special accelerated classes, and given awards for their accomplishments. Self-destructive behavior for all to see essentially ensures that someone will arrive to help, though rescue attempts sometimes happen too late. Such behavior might also serve to undercut the suffocating aspects of their high-achieving status by demonstrating that it is undeserved, allowing them to catch their breath before the next challenge arises.

To some audiences, it might seem perverse to talk about honors students having challenges, given their intellectual gifts and the opportunities that typically come their way. Colleagues occasionally mention to me “how wonderful it must be to teach honors students,” as if these classes run themselves. But, as we know, honors students have their own special needs and the young lady sitting in my office with her worried mother didn’t get to this horrible place on her own.

“HELP, I NEED SOMEBODY”

So what can we do? I think we need to embed, within our classes, curriculum, and external programming, specific opportunities for students to ask for help. We should reward this behavior in grading rubrics and informal praise. We should model how to ask for help, since many honors students don't even know what that activity looks like, and we should diversify the opportunities for students to request assistance since help comes in many different forms. Identifying vulnerability as a courageous and even attractive stance rather than a mark of weakness gives honors students a broader range of options from which to choose. Resituating achievement as a communal activity rather than an individual accomplishment would also improve matters. Certainly the heroic courage demonstrated at Virginia Tech in the aftermath of the 2007 shootings evolved out of a strong sense of community.

In addition, professors need to be more aggressive in creating opportunities for students to seek help. The standard encouragement of “see me in office hours” or “here's the number to the counseling office” will not get it done. Teaching students how to view themselves more holistically and not just as individuals whose entire identity is shaped by the “honors student” designation and reassuring them that their academic struggles don't function as attacks on the self can open up options for students who feel trapped.

Honors students, teachers, and administrators would all benefit from talking about the honors experience a bit differently than we do today, reconfiguring and expanding the categories we use, and suppressing the desire to essentialize the honors experience. Rather than language that emphasizes “being the best,” being “different,” and finding refuge from the “regular” student body, terminology that emphasizes honors as an alternative mode of learning or curriculum can help remove the enormous pressure that presses down on honors students today. Ultimately, we must guide students out of the bind that positions asking for help as a sign of failure.

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