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2010

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Owens, Eric W. and Giazzoni, Michael, "Honors Students in Crisis: Four Thoughts from the Field" (2010). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 272.
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Honors Students in Crisis: Four Thoughts from the Field

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As we considered the topic and lead essay of the *JNCHC* Forum "Helping Honors Students in Trouble," we were struck by a number of assumptions that seem to be prevalent not only at our universities but among colleagues at other institutions. We have identified four assumptions we would like to address in this essay from perspectives that are informed by the scholarly literature and by our combined experience of twenty years working with honors students as professional counselors, advisors, and faculty members. These four observations lead us to recommendations for others working with honors students.

1. Trouble is trouble. Two problems are inherent in this assumption. First, we take issue with the notion that all crises should be addressed similarly. As Jack Dudley notes in the lead article, "capitulation or growth can be the result of crisis." Every student comes with his or her own history, understanding of how the world works, and background in constructing meaning. When human beings are confronted with crises they cannot understand, they typically retreat to this personal history, understanding, and background as a place of comfort from which to make sense of the nonsensical. Every individual thus has a different perspective on crisis, on trouble, and on how best to react to and recover from it.

Second, an experience that can be emotionally crippling for one person may cause another to find a resource for personal growth and maturation. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), for example, affects far too many of our students at early stages of their personal growth. However, what is not discussed in the popular media, and what is largely ignored in the scholarly literature, is the notion of post-traumatic growth (PTG). Tedeschi and Calhoun describe PTG as the "experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises" (1). PTG can manifest itself in a variety of ways: increased self-esteem, improved personal relationships, enriched appreciation for life in general, and enhanced sense of

self-efficacy or personal strength. Let us not assume that trouble must always mean trouble.

2. Reason is primarily what academia has to offer students who are facing difficult challenges. As academics we tend to work from a perspective that a previous dean liked to call "Life above the neck." We are thinkers and scholars; the cognitive is the familiar and comfortable realm in which we work. In classrooms we ask students, "What do you *think* about all of this?" This question is valid in the intellectual arena as well as the therapy session. How a student cognitively processes a crisis is important. "What do you *think* about [the shooting, your friend's sexual assault, the pressure from your parents, and so forth]?" is a question that needs to be asked.

However, basic counseling theory suggests that *thinking* (cognition) is but one of the three central components of an individual: the cognitive, the behavioral, and the affective (Egan). The behavioral in our students is all too apparent; behaviors are the mental health equivalent of symptoms in medical practice. Behaviors manifest and present themselves to us. The student who enters an office to discuss a research fellowship and suddenly, seemingly without warning, begins to speak about his suicidal ideations is *behaving*.

Behavior, though, is the result of a great deal of thought and feeling, and this brings us to the affective. Humans are *feeling* as well as thinking and behaving beings, and we take issue with the notion that faculty and others who work with honors students should leave their humanity at the door of the academy. Academics find it all too easy to ask "What do you *think* about all of this?" but are often uncomfortable in asking "How do you *feel* about all of this?" Higher education understandably focuses on our students' thoughts, but it should be possible to inquire about feelings while maintaining a hold on reason. Many people are hesitant to ask the affective question; we have certainly found ourselves afraid to ask students how they feel, and fear of the answer may have been the root of this hesitation.

The mere fact that we may be afraid to ask the question, however, is what makes us human in the first place and is what makes it absolutely appropriate to ask the affective question. If a student approaches us with her or his own form of trouble or crisis, we must remember that this person felt safe enough to come to *us*. Obviously we have done most of the heavy lifting already; we have developed rapport and a place of safety and comfort. Let us offer our emotional comfort as well as our intellectual strength.

3. Our students are fully operating adults. Of course our students are adults, but we think it is important to keep in mind that our students are *young* adults. Setting aside for a moment Dudley's term "fully operating," it is safe to assume that our students are not fully *matured* adults; adulthood is a relatively new experience for them. However, students can be forced to see the

world from the perspective of a mature adult when faced with a crisis or difficult situation. Urie Bronfenbrenner suggested that, when people are faced with emotional or physical risk, their normal developmental trajectories may be altered and abnormal development may occur. Students today are often thrust into circumstances for which an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old adult is hardly prepared. Even fifty-year-olds are rarely prepared to cope with, for instance, acts of terrorism or campus violence.

Students, whether in honors or not, are still finding their way and learning what adulthood means to and for them. Research on college student development suggests that students are discovering how to grow as intellectual adults (Perry, 1968 and 1981). They are also in the process of learning how best to manage emotions, interact with others, and develop independence, purpose, and integrity (Chickering and Reisser). Further, they are struggling with developing a sense of morality (Gilligan; Kohlberg). In short, most college students are indeed adults, but let us not assume that our students are "fully operating" adults. They have recently left childhood and are just now learning to navigate the treacherous waters of adulthood. When those waters are made more treacherous by traumatic events, it is only natural to assume that these developing adults may feel the need to regress, at least slightly or for a short time.

4. Honors students are just like other students. For those of us who work in honors, we know this is far from the case; however, we may not understand just how our students are unique. The intellectual differences are obvious, but what about the emotional differences? Research such as that of Rice, Leever, Christopher, and Porter examines issues of perfectionism, stress, and social adjustment as they relate to the variety of mental health needs of gifted college students. External and internal pressures for perfectionism can cause a great deal of stress for our students. Additionally, many gifted individuals experience challenges when relating to peers, developing relationships, and integrating into larger communities.

Research has also shown that the affective needs of honors students are often overlooked because mental health professionals assume that intellectual talent must naturally equate to an increased ability to handle life's emotional difficulties (Greene, 2002 and 2006; Leung). Those of us who work with honors students should remind ourselves not to make this faulty assumption. Honors students *are* different: for better or for worse, they typically see the world differently from their peers, understand crises differently, and create meaning in unique ways, and we must honor these differences and appreciate that our students will likely react to trauma differently from many of their peers. At the same time, though, we cannot assume that they need our help less than their non-honors peers do.

Crises like the tragic events at Virginia Tech force us to examine the ways we approach our work as professionals and as members of our academic communities. Informed by research, we can be more helpful and provide more support than our natural tendencies might allow. Being open to the developmental possibilities inherent in crisis, approaching our students with our full range of humanity, and considering the ways that our students differ from other adults and other students are all means of augmenting our helping skills for the honors population. Through reasoned consideration of these topics, we may better serve our students in the resolution of personal traumas and campus crises.

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