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Editor's Introduction

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Ada Long

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A typical issue of *JNCHC* contains a Forum that focuses on a matter of particular significance to honors educators and then presents research essays that are unrelated to the topic of the Forum. This issue, by contrast, has a thematic wholeness. While the first eight essays address specifically the topic of “Honors and the Future of the Humanities,” the two research essays—one of which is a Portz-Award winner—illustrate that the humanities, which all agree play an essential role in honors, are not just alive but robust.

Larry Andrews leads off the Forum with his essay “The Humanities Are Dead! Long Live the Humanities!” A Call for Papers went out on the NCHC website and listserv and in the NCHC E-Newsletter, inviting members to contribute to the Forum. The Call included a list of questions that Forum contributors might consider:

Is the connection of honors to the humanities essential to its basic nature? Is it possible to imagine—or desire—an honors education that is not heavily reliant on the humanities? Would the downfall of the humanities spell the downfall of honors? What changes, if any, need to be made in honors education to secure its future within the current climate? Should honors detach itself from the humanities and, if so, how? Are current data-driven trends in honors education, such as rubrics and outcomes assessment, a move away from the humanities and toward the social sciences, and are these trends beneficial or perilous to honors? Are the humanities a luxury of the past while vocationalism and speed-learning are harbingers of the future, and should honors educators fight or accept a future-oriented stance? Will the humanities become the purview of the privileged while the 99% move further toward technical education, and, if so, what will this mean for the diversity and quality of honors education? Does its connection to the humanities bolster the notion that honors is elitist? Is the critical thinking engendered by honors and the humanities a benefit or a threat to democracy? Is a political agenda at work in the current assault on or neglect of the humanities, and does this agenda imperil honors education as well?

The Forum includes seven responses to the Call for Papers in addition to the lead essay.

In a culture where the humanities are constantly pronounced to be dying, Larry Andrews identifies bad omens—glut of unemployed PhDs, hard turn toward STEM-related curricula, focus on quantitative and measurable outcomes, financial cuts, “info-bits,” social media, degeneration of political discourse—and also significant good omens that, no surprise here, are hard to describe in a simple list. The humanities require nuance and narrative, complexity and eloquence, interpretation and empathy, all of which make them endangered in a simplifying culture and also essential to an honors education. Andrews describes the deep connections of honors to the humanities in its history, values, and purpose, concluding with Cardinal Newman’s statement about the value of a university (in this case, honors) education that it is “as useful as the art of wealth or the art of health, though it is less susceptible of method, and less tangible, less certain, less complete in its result.”

The responses to the Forum topic and to Andrews’s essay emphasize key qualities of the humanities that necessarily tie them to honors education: imagination, creativity, interdisciplinarity, quality of life, nuance, complexity, deep thinking, problem-solving, empathy, and social justice.

We begin with an essay that illustrates the essential creativity and imagination of the humanities. In “Song of The Disrupted,” Frances McCue of the University of Washington says she “sing[s] from a place of vulnerability and rarity. But, sometimes, the stronger the cage, the more robust the song.” Creating “some revelation through splintered vision,” McCue meanders through her experiences teaching in honors and then through traditional defenses of the humanities, snatching a little pollen from each to arrive at a vision of the humanities as a grand concoction that connects and disrupts all else that we do: “Between the digital and the sky, between the poet and the software engineer, between the music from the grand hall and the tweets of a disloyal fan, we live, the disrupted. Join us.”

In “Honors and the Humanities: Necessary as Air and Water,” Angela Marie Salas of Indiana University Southeast reaffirms the close connection of honors to the humanities as well as to all the qualities that Andrews described appreciatively. Salas argues that these qualities are exactly the ones we need to be extending to students who might otherwise be limited to a vocational or technical education. We can accomplish this goal is by assuring a high-quality honors education at two-year colleges and also by establishing strong articulation agreements between two-year and four-year institutions. Honors and

the humanities, Salas argues, are as crucial to a decent life as clean air and clean water, and honors educators need to make them accessible not just to traditional liberal arts students but to all students.

The next three essays describe the worth of the humanities not for their own sake alone but for their essential value to all other disciplines, including and perhaps especially the STEM fields. In “‘The Endless Appetite’: Honors Education and the Spirit of the Humanities,” Andrew Martino of Southern New Hampshire University writes, “Courses in mathematics, economics, science, and engineering, to name just a few, enhance and are enhanced by traditional humanities courses.” Citing as an example Thomas Piketty’s use of literature to explain his economic theory, Martino advocates an “honors curriculum [that] promotes a willingness to push the boundaries of how we think about educational value, moving us beyond use value and toward exploring epistemological questions.” In agreement with Charles Dickens, Northrop Frye, and Martha Nussbaum as well as Larry Andrews, Martino advocates the kind of critical and imaginative thinking that leads to personal wholeness, responsible citizenship, and intellectual integrity.

Amaris Ketcham of the University of New Mexico makes the case in “Homo sapiens, All Too Homo sapiens: Wise Man, All Too Human” that the separation of the humanities from science and technology is based on false assumptions. The sciences like the humanities depend on imagination, language, narrative, context, and overarching concepts. “Where the physical universe collides with the fanciful and flawed human experience of life,” she writes, “there is creative energy, be it in scientific research or creative writing. Both are meant to birth new knowledge, rouse questions, explore our relationship with the world, employ the senses, test ideas, and better our understanding of life and the human experience.” The interdisciplinary tools of the humanities can and should prepare honors students to solve the social and scientific as well as human problems that await us in the future.

Annamarie Guzy makes a different and also compelling connection between the humanities and other disciplines, including the sciences and professional or technical fields, in her essay “Honors Composition: Humanity beyond the Humanities.” Drawing on her own professional background and her current position as a teacher of honors composition at the University of South Alabama, she echoes Ketcham’s argument about the interdisciplinary tools of the humanities, one of the most important being “the humanity within the humanities: the kindness, the sympathy, the compassion; a *good person* speaking well.” When students in technical, professional, and scientific

fields are fast-tracked past the humanities, Guzy argues, they lose “valuable chances to discover the interdisciplinary connection—the human connection—among all majors.”

In “Increased Awareness, Increased Appreciation,” Barbra Nightingale of Broward College argues that awareness and appreciation of other cultures are the key contributions of the humanities to a worthy education and especially to an honors education. In a world where religious, ethnic, national, and political groups seem to be narrowing rather than broadening their awareness of difference, “more exposure to the humanities is essential to the health and well-breeding of the citizens of our world.” In her connections between honors, the humanities, and a just global culture, Nightingale anticipates the next essay’s focus on public service.

Having always wished to “help heal the world,” Joe Kraus describes having felt that the humanities were peripheral to such an effort until, as a graduate student, he became inspired by Salman Rushdie and Václav Havel, whose work he saw as “a kind of applied humanities, the work of the imagination in the world.” Teaching in honors at the University of Scranton has been a lesson for him that honors research in any field is “an expression of the self attempting to understand itself, which, however it manifests itself, is precisely the central subject of the humanities.” In his essay “Imagination and the Humanities in Honors across the Disciplines at a Jesuit University,” Kraus describes the value of the humanities in working with students who strive to do “more . . . just because,” which is the core value of the humanities and also of the Ignatian concept of “the magis,” “the restless desire to hone oneself for the sake of better serving the world.”

Kraus’s assertion of the special connection of the humanities to the Jesuit concept of social justice is a perfect lead-in to the research essay titled “Assessing Social Justice as a Learning Outcome in Honors” by Naomi Yavneh Klos, Kendall J. Eskine, and Michael Pashkevich of Loyola University New Orleans. The authors describe the expansion of the NCHC’s “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” in a document called “Essential Characteristics of a Jesuit Honors Program,” which calls students to “bring their intellectual talents into service of the world’s great needs.” Ignatian Colloquium, a required 1-credit honors course for first-year students, draws on the pedagogy of social justice, nicely summarized by the authors, to teach not just awareness and reflection but action. A post-semester survey of the 83 students in the honors colloquium and of 142 non-honors students registered in two other courses (first-year chemistry and religion) revealed two significant

differences: honors students were more confident that social justice can be put into action and that their own actions could further social justice. The authors suggest that their strategies for encouraging social action in a Jesuit context would work well in any honors program or college.

The Portz-Award-winning essay provides hope for the future and an affirmation of the arguments made by many of the writers in this issue of JNCHC. An accounting student at Eastern Kentucky University, Sam Shearer has produced a well-researched and beautifully written historical study of Truman Smith, thus supporting the views of Guzy and Ketcham, for instance, that the humanities and the professions are as complementary as they are compatible. Shearer combines respect for nuance and complexity with rigorous scholarship to give a fascinating account of the role that Truman Smith played in the lead-up to World War II. As a head military attaché in Berlin, he provided expert intelligence on the Nazi military buildup only to have it ignored at the highest levels, and his association with Lindbergh during this era led to his embroilment in political rivalries that undermined his credibility. The narrative of “political polarization and demonization of ideological opponents” that Shearer presents is interesting in itself, and, as he concludes, it also has “an oddly familiar ring to those of us accustomed to the American news media markets of our own times.” Shearer’s essay presents further hope for the future of the humanities in educating our honors students, interpreting our world, understanding complex ideas, and moving toward a better society.

