

## CHAPTER TEN

# Cultivating Institutional Change: Infusing Principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion into Everyday Honors College Practices

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For social justice to exist, diversity, equity, and inclusion for all must become what we in honors are about, centrally, obsessively, perennially.

—Lisa L. Coleman, *Occupy Honors Education* (xiv)

(Editor's Note: Westminster College officially became Westminster University on 1 July 2023. Because the programming described in this chapter took place before the change occurred, the original name is preserved.)

## INTRODUCTION

College campuses across the United States currently face an opportunity and a challenge. In the coming decades, demographers predict the decline of a White majority and the growth of diverse racial and ethnic populations. With higher education being more diverse today than at any previous time, college campuses serve as a microcosm of this future. Adding to this growth in racial and ethnic diversity is the recognition that college students embody a range of identities in terms of sex, gender, and sexuality. Students come to college with a wide array of physical, mental, and psychological abilities. They vary according to age, religion, socioeconomic background, marital status, national origin, and citizenship status. These changes—in tandem with the growing momentum of social justice movements—have catalyzed more robust commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) among institutions of higher education. “We in honors must be prepared to explain why our programs do not reinforce a system of privilege and elitism within our institutions,” asserts David M. Jones in “From Good Intentions to Educational Equity in an Honors Program” (67). Are honors colleges grappling with this legacy of exclusion and building inclusive and equitable practices as their campuses diversify? Can they utilize these practices to create truly diverse and authentic communities? If the answer to these questions is yes, how can honors colleges participate in this critical project?

This chapter seeks to answer these questions by comparing honors colleges at the University of Kentucky and Westminster College (Utah). Both began as honors programs but in 2017 transitioned to honors colleges. The mission of the Lewis Honors College is to improve the Commonwealth of Kentucky and the world by helping students explore their purpose, develop intellectually, and lead with integrity. As a part of this mission and the vision to create a world-class honors experience at Kentucky’s largest land-grant public university, the Lewis Honors College strives to implement best practices in its implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies and initiatives. The vision of the Westminster Honors College is to cultivate a community of diverse voices through

genuine curiosity, intentional reflection, authentic conversation, and interdisciplinary inquiry to engage the challenges of a complex world with courage, creativity, and compassion. To bring this vision into sharper focus, the Westminster Honors College designed and implemented its campus's first unit-specific diversity climate survey in 2018. Its findings have informed strategic curricular, programming, and staffing practices. In the following sections, we describe how each college is striving to act on their commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## **LEWIS HONORS COLLEGE**

### **Assigning Responsibility**

To ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion are everyday practices in an honors college, leaders must establish clear expectations of responsibility for advancing DEI initiatives. Although the ideal for any institution would be a true commitment to DEI by all employees, Garrett D. Hoffman and Tania D. Mitchell's analysis reveals the dangers of asserting that diversity work is "everyone's business," however much one feels that should be true. "By placing the onus on all parties within an institution to further equity, the very real power differentials present in this institutional hierarchy are erased," explain Hoffman and Mitchell (285). In the Lewis Honors College, the founding dean created the position of assistant dean for diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as a diversity and inclusion advisory council to solidify and make visible the commitment to DEI by acknowledging the labor performed and expertise needed to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. The dedicated position and council also signal to the university community, to the student body, and to prospective families that the honors college takes seriously the work of addressing historic practices of exclusion associated with honors education. This step also acknowledges the work that is all too often invisible or the unquantified labor often performed by employees of color or those holding other marginalized identities. The establishment of a diversity council also distributes the labor of DEI efforts among a larger group of

employees who may also offer greater representation of identities and backgrounds when making decisions about practices and policies to advance diversity and inclusion in honors.

The duties of the assistant dean for diversity, equity, and inclusion and the DEI council include coordinating programming that deepens cultural competencies, increases cultural humility, affirms identities, fosters community, and responds to local and national events affecting our community members; responding to concerns about inequities, discrimination, and questions about issues related to ability, religious affiliation, gender and sexual identities, regionalism, socioeconomic status, first-generation status, veteran status, and other aspects of identity that may shape honors students' and employees' experiences; and collaborating with units across campus and in the community to create opportunities for recruiting a more diverse applicant pool to the honors college, to offer a rich variety of programming including speakers, workshops, films, and other events reflecting a variety of identities, communities, or concerns. The assistant dean for DEI sits on the dean's leadership team, which grants the occupant crucial access to leadership, a literal seat at the table that allows them to ensure the commitment to DEI is integrated across all units of the college and to advance goals for actual structural change. That positioning has allowed them to have success over the past three years, particularly in the areas of recruiting, with increased visits from students involved in organizations supporting historically marginalized youth and expanded collaborative events with the university's diversity recruiters. Other successful steps have involved professional development of faculty, staff, and peer mentors on DEI issues; the inclusion of diverse authors and issues of epistemic injustice in the honors foundation seminar; and the incorporation of honors board members' expertise and experiences in shaping the college's DEI Action Plan and strategic plan.

The existence of such a role does not, though, absolve other leaders at the college from centering DEI commitments in their work. This commitment is crucial to making DEI an everyday honors practice. The current dean of Lewis ensured broad responsibility

for DEI initiatives by developing a DEI Action Plan in collaboration with the college leadership team, which includes the directors of college life, the Center for Personal Development, recruitment and admissions, academic affairs, philanthropy, and communications. Furthermore, dedicated honors faculty must demonstrate their own efforts contributing to diversity and inclusion in their performance evaluations. The associate dean for academic affairs and the director of undergraduate studies are charged to work with academic affairs units and individual instructors to increase the number of course offerings and study abroad experiences addressing DEI concepts and to recruit a more diverse pool of honors faculty. Nearly every employee of the college is expected to contribute to the advancement of DEI in some way.

### **Recruiting a Diverse Student Body**

Because many honors programs have been historic sites of racial homogeneity, DEI efforts in many honors colleges must prioritize diversifying the student body. Betsy Greenleaf Yarrison notes that many honors colleges “use test scores, high school grades, and class ranking to determine who will be granted asylum” in ways that perpetuate racial homogeneity at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), foster isolation, and further burden students of underrepresented identities (14). McCoy points out that when PWIs admit “students who are racially and ideologically homogeneous with the institutional culture,” they “perpetuate a racialized hierarchy that requires acquiescing to majority perspectives to achieve academic success” (338). Such environments are not inclusive and affirming. To counter this issue, building strong relationships with university recruiters is crucial to diversifying the honors applicant pool, and this step has proved productive at Lewis. A fruitful exchange between newly hired university diversity recruiters at Kentucky and honors college DEI professionals provided the recruiters with key talking points to share with prospective students in their recruitment events and established a collaborative relationship that continues to yield more opportunities for the honors college to participate in university-sponsored initiatives. Honors college

representatives were welcomed to the Diversity Access Team, a network of recruitment professionals from across the university who share the goal of recruiting members of historically underrepresented, excluded, and marginalized populations to each college. We were also invited to promote the many benefits of honors education and to encourage applications to a large audience of high school students from diverse backgrounds and identities at the Diversity Leadership Summit, allowing for interactions with over 250 prospective students in a single day. Students from a wide range of identities and backgrounds are successful in honors, and our recruiting and admissions processes must recognize that fact. Yarrison urges, "Honors must reimagine itself [. . .] to create a path to student academic success that does not automatically privilege those students who come to it from a privileged pre-college experience" (14).

Ensuring a diverse pool of applicants, however, is not enough to diversify the student body; honors colleges must also scrutinize their admissions processes for ways to improve equity and reduce bias. Careful review of application forms for assumptions is crucial. In our review of applications, scorers at Lewis noticed few students included work experiences among their extracurricular activities. This omission could potentially undermine the chance of admission for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds for whom work after school is necessary and prohibitive of their participation in school-sponsored activities. Although our training sessions for application scorers discussed crediting work experience as an extracurricular activity and a demonstration of leadership potential, we had not initially signaled to applicants to include employment among their activities. Noticing this absence, we modified the application to include instructions to include work in this field so prospective students would know such pursuits count in our holistic review process that examines a variety of factors including essay responses, leadership potential, grades, and course rigor.

Another way to diversify the honors student population is to establish other paths into honors beyond first-year admissions.

Creating other doors to honors counters the deficit-mindedness that past admissions models featured, particularly the “deficit-minded belief that implementing holistic admissions means lowering standards” and that “students of color benefit disproportionately from preferential treatment in admissions” (D. Jones 58). The upper-level admissions application to Lewis offers an opportunity to recruit students who may not have applied to the college initially or who were not admitted as first-year students. This admissions process resulted from the recognition that traditional processes for evaluating students have historically excluded many students who attended schools with fewer resources, like AP courses, standardized test prep programs, and robust extracurricular opportunities, as well as those students who spent after-school hours working or caregiving. The upper-level admissions process provides a way to allow students to be evaluated exclusively on their academic performance at the university and their potential for success in honors.

Another barrier we recognized is self-concept. Some students have a hard time envisioning themselves as honors students. To counter this tendency, we intentionally built relationships across campus with groups serving underrepresented minoritized students. Honors advisors, personal development counselors, and student representatives provide information about the upper-level admissions opportunity to students served by the Center for Academic Resources and Enrichment Services, Veterans Services, First-Generation Student Services, the International Center, the MLK Center, the African Student Organization, and the Transfer Center. Because this approach proved to be successful, we plan to further our reach to additional student populations in upcoming terms.

## **Fostering Belonging in Advising**

Commitments to DEI extend beyond recruiting a diverse student body to ensuring dedicated service to the current student population. To help advisors stay current on best practices regarding support of students and to further develop cultural competencies and agility, honors advisors devote part of their

professional development to building DEI skill sets. Lewis advisors avoid a prescriptive approach by encouraging students to take the lead. This allows students to share what guidance they would like to receive and keeps advisors from utilizing script-based advising patterns that are delivered similarly regardless of the student. Academic advising offers a practical place to center the needs of each student and to coach students through the process of identifying research interests and building relationships with faculty. Taking the time to be well-informed about course content and offerings, instructors, and research opportunities means advisors can best direct their students. In Lewis, advisors are urged to be mindful of office space aesthetics. An inviting environment that provides symbols of a commitment to providing a safe space for all students can help students feel comfortable and identify allyship. Advisors are particularly positioned to build the culture of belonging that fosters inclusion as they build long-term relationships with their students throughout their growth in college.

## **Collaborating Across Campus**

Strong relationships with other campus professionals are also crucial to the success of any honors college because they can contribute to robust programming for students, faculty, and staff. The persons charged with DEI responsibilities can enhance college offerings by collaborating with units across campus to co-sponsor speakers, trainings, films, workshops, and other events that might be too burdensome in terms of budget or labor if undertaken alone. Our college has collaborated with the university's MLK Center, Office for LGBTQ\* Resources, Appalachian Center, Center for Equality and Social Justice, the John Jacob Niles Center for American Music, the Office for Institutional Diversity, the Department of Gender and Women's Studies, the Gatton College of Business and Economics, the Institute for the Study of Free Enterprise, UK Libraries, the UK Women's Forum, and the UK Gaines Center for the Humanities. These collaborations not only made those events possible but also cultivated relationships with other faculty and staff that have led to additional instructor interest and future programs.



Collaborative programming can also expose students to faculty of a wider range of identities, especially if the honors faculty of a college or program is insufficiently diverse, as is often the case. Yarrison remarks, “Honors students from underserved and marginalized populations rarely see themselves reflected in the designated intelligentsia of most universities” (16). Whether an honors program staff includes racial and ethnic diversity along with diversity in ability, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, and other identities and backgrounds, working with other units on campus can facilitate student connections to a wider range of individuals as well as better promote the honors program and increase opportunities for honors students, faculty, and staff.

## **Developing Student Leaders**

Honors colleges want to develop not only high academic achievers but leaders in their communities. Students in the Lewis Honors College may contribute to DEI through participation in or creation of additional student-formed organizations. The most robust of these is the DEI Coalition. The DEI Coalition works with the assistant dean to generate ideas for programming, workshops, trainings, field trips, book clubs, film viewings, and other activities. They meet monthly in addition to their other activities, and in these meetings student leaders divide up their time intentionally, opening with space for updates and concerns followed by community-building activities. Such groups are crucial for URM students at PWIs. Samuel D. Museus et al. note, “Incongruence between students’ precollege cultures (and therefore cultural identities) and the cultures of their campus is negatively related to their ability to find membership in their campus communities” (470). One way this incongruity may be addressed is through the formation of affiliate and resource groups based on identities. By connecting honors students to organizations that already exist on campus or by supporting those who wish to create organizations of honors students of specific cultural heritages or identities, a greater sense of belonging may result. “Traditional White organizations often hold inadequate

representation of Black students” and other students of color and may involve “White students interrogat[ing] the legitimacy of a service created for students of color if it is not in line with the interests of the dominant student body,” explains Veronica Jones (27). Organizations like the DEI Coalition and Hay que Hablar, a Spanish language club developed by the co-president of the DEI Coalition, DISC for disabled and chronically ill students, and other affiliate groups can foster belonging by creating sites for shared experience, identity, background, and heritage, as well as counter “race-neutral diversity approaches on college campuses” that deliberately engage in “downplaying and disavowing related social problems [in ways that] perpetuate the status quo by failing to challenge normalized racism” (V. Jones 23). Creating opportunities for students to form groups of their own within the honors college fosters a sense of belonging and affirmation, and experiences within them have led some of our students to report that Lewis is the place on campus where they feel most free to be themselves.

Groups like this within the honors college serve as instrumental resources, for their existence signals to the students that designated groups exist to advance DEI, groups to which they can bring ideas, questions, and concerns. These groups foster environments in which they are assured their identities are affirmed. They can help students feel empowered in places they may feel outnumbered or disenfranchised.

## **Listening to Our Students**

The DEI Coalition is only one of many ways we strive to gather feedback from our students about their perceptions of belonging. Another involved a graduate researcher and honors alumna with her faculty mentor who met with Lewis Honors College students to assess feelings of belonging, especially among students whose identities are concordant with categories designated as underrepresented minorities by the university. Their research illuminated patterns on areas of concern, feelings of isolation, and positive reports on the honors college in comparison with other parts of the university; however, these insights must be interpreted with caution because

the resulting sample was limited by the university's response to the pandemic to disperse students from campus. We have also begun utilizing focus groups facilitated by two of our honors advisors currently enrolled in doctoral programs in education policy. Sensitive to power dynamics that can shape or suppress feedback, we felt it important that the students meet with personnel who do not assess their academic work and who lack potentially intimidating administrative titles. Another strategy for gathering feedback will be a new annual survey distributed to all honors students. The survey includes questions about belonging and engagement in the college.

These many strategies aim to build a culture of belonging at Lewis. Compelling scholarship highlights the elitist history of honors in higher education (National Collegiate Honors Council). Despite efforts to counter this legacy, Betsy Greenleaf Yarrison, past president of the Maryland Collegiate Honors Council, notes, "Honors programs seek diversity, but in truth we tend to practice assimilation" (15). At Lewis, we are practicing intentional, attentive listening and response to student perspectives; empowerment of students to DEI leadership and community building; culturally responsive holistic advising expansion of inclusive admissions policies; and clear articulation of professional responsibilities regarding DEI to supplant this tendency. Similarly, the Honors College at Westminster College is spearheading specific practices to counter assimilation and forge an authentic and diverse student community.

## **WESTMINSTER COLLEGE**

### **Growing Honors at Westminster**

Honors education at Westminster began in 1986 with 18 undergraduates. Since the inception of that program, students have been at the center of honors curricula and programming. In the early days, honors at Westminster promised an enhanced educational experience for academically talented and highly motivated students. In practice, this meant honors students met in interdisciplinary, seminar-style classes, read primary texts, and learned with professors who represented most disciplines, from anthropology

to theatre. Over the years, honors at Westminster grew. In 2017, the program became an honors college, serving approximately 225 students.

The college has continued to evolve. Extensive conversation produced a new mission, vision, and values statement in 2019. The Westminster Honors College aims “to cultivate a community of diverse voices through genuine curiosity, intentional reflection, authentic conversation, and interdisciplinary inquiry to engage the challenges of a complex world with courage, creativity, and compassion” (Westminster, “About”). Eight core values help that vision materialize: academic and personal growth, community-centered conversation, compassion and empathy, connections across difference, curiosity and dedication, student empowerment, and support and mentorship. Community is central to our vision and forms the heart of our values. But how do we ensure that our communities are diverse, equitable, and inclusive? What practices cultivate the community that we strive to be?

## **Developing and Administering a Climate Survey**

As honors transformed to a college in 2017, we began a study to answer these questions. This effort dovetailed with the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion’s (DEI) call to achieve exceptional learning and inclusive excellence across campus. As the campus’s newest academic unit, we were poised to embrace this challenge. Our first move was data collection. Some data suggested that our students were more diverse than ever before, but we needed more granular information. Secondly, we studied student perceptions, attitudes, and experiences around equity. To understand inclusion, we surveyed students about their experience of affiliation, membership, and identification within the honors college and across campus.

Accordingly, we designed a 51-question climate survey that solicited data on identity, perception, and experiences. We hoped to create a baseline to inform future programming. That effort was part of a national trend. In response to a growing focus on these critical issues, hundreds of colleges and universities conducted climate surveys

between 2015 and 2020 (Higher Education Research Institute; Rankin). We administered our survey in March 2018 and received responses from 149 students (a 70% response rate). Although the survey has 51 questions, there were 185 possible responses because of the nature of the questions, as shown in Table 1.

Response rates for surveys of college students are notoriously low, averaging around 25% (Fosnacht et al.). Our response rate was nearly three times that size. We attribute our high response rate to three factors. First, our transition from a program to a college generated excitement among students and faculty. Becoming a college brought greater autonomy, recognition, and opportunities. Our climate survey rode the surf of that excitement as we promoted it as a way to better understand ourselves and to foment a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive community.

Faculty buy-in also boosted the response rate. We asked honors faculty to devote twenty minutes of class time to the survey, offering a two-week submission window. Almost universally, faculty agreed. Finally, we worked closely with the Student Honors Council (SHC). Student leaders grasped the importance of this tool. The president of the SHC was the first student to complete the survey, and the SHC regularly sent out encouraging reminders. When the survey closed, we had a trove of data to explore.

Here we discuss findings in three areas—student identity, classroom experiences, and co-curricular programming—that we found most compelling and actionable.

**TABLE 1. STUDENT RESPONSES TO Q5: PLEASE INDICATE THE EXTENT TO WHICH YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS.**

The Honors College at Westminster:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Encourages students to have a public voice and share their ideas openly	2.03% (3)	8.78% (13)	56.76% (84)	32.43% (48)
Has faculty and administrators who regularly speak about the value of diversity	1.35% (2)	12.16% (18)	56.11% (86)	28.38% (42)
Promotes the appreciation of cultural differences	0.68% (1)	9.46% (14)	60.14% (89)	29.73% (44)

N = 148 (1 skipped)

## Survey Findings around Student Identity

Our discussion of student identity highlights strengths and areas of dissatisfaction. We asked students to rate their ability to work with people different from themselves. Eighty-nine percent indicated their ability to work with others with “different beliefs” was a “major strength,” while 97% identified their ability to work cooperatively with “diverse people” as a “major strength.” Qualitative feedback reveals honors has cultivated this capability: “I love the Honors College. It is seriously what makes Westminster worth it to me. I would not be satisfied in my other classes without the in-depth and complex discussions I have in my honors classes and outside of classes with other honors students” (Stewart).

Nearly 40% of the respondents, however, indicated they were dissatisfied with the racial and ethnic diversity of the student body. Student comments emphasized the necessity to connect across differences and foster respect between groups: “I hope that the Honors College will include more diverse students and faculty from different backgrounds to better understand and respect other identities, perspectives, and beliefs. This would make the Honors College a better place for students to connect” (Stewart). Another student emphasized that low numbers of underrepresented students impacted their ability to become an integral member of the community: “I recall coming into the Honors College and not seeing many people of color. In my classes, I was always one of the only persons of color. The lack of racial/ethnic diversity in the Honors College has contributed to my struggle of adjusting to college” (Stewart).

Using these data, we created a strategic plan for diversity and excellence. Its vision—“to institutionalize the link between diversity and student achievement and demonstrate how excellence can be inclusive”—contributed to a primary objective: “Entering first-year honors cohorts and lateral entry cohorts will exceed national figures on racial diversity in honors; and will meet or exceed diversity figures for the overall entering first-year Westminster class in the areas of students of color, low-income, and first-generation students” (Westminster, “Diversity”).

The strategic plan recommended strategies such as building relationships with high school groups like Latinos in Action to modifying our admissions processes to engage in holistic review processes and de-emphasize standardized tests scores. Since 2018, those efforts have intensified. Currently, Westminster is a test optional institution, and there is no minimum ACT/SAT score to apply to the honors college. This practice acknowledges that standardized test scores closely correlate with family socioeconomic status while containing little predictive power around academic success (National Collegiate Honors Council; Khé). Our application invites students to write about their experiences in an inclusive way. Rather than asking students to write about their “favorite volunteer experience,” we have asked about memorable experiences or powerful conversations. The latter prompt does not assume free time to volunteer and reduces some bias in the admissions process (Badenhausen 11).

These efforts produced results. In 2020–2021, 26.6% of honors students identified as students of color versus 22.4% for Westminster’s overall undergraduate population. At other honors colleges across the country, race/ethnicity figures tend to be much lower than the overall student population. Students of color have led the Student Honors Council four of the last five years, while honors students across campus are leaders in fighting for equity through organizations such as Queer Compass, the Feminist Club, Walkways to Westminster, and the Society for the Advancement of Chicanx/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science. For the fourth time in the last five years, an honors student received the MLK Unsung Hero Award for promoting a diverse and inclusive campus and community.

As this list of accolades attests, honors students at Westminster are ambitious. They aim this ambition beyond campus as well. When asked to identify the highest academic degree they hoped to obtain, 80% indicated plans for further study. Students identified the essential role that honors played in their preparation. As one student shared, “I think the Honors College pushes students to have thoughts of their own and to think critically” (Stewart).

Despite their confidence and ambition, our students struggled with mental health issues: 35% of respondents indicated they had been diagnosed with some psychological disorder such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD in the past year. To put this number in context, the American College Health Association conducts an annual assessment of college students. It reported that 21.6% of respondents reported being treated for anxiety in the past 12 months, while 17.9% had been treated for depression (2017). In Utah, 25% of young people between the ages of 18 and 25 reported seeking treatment or receiving a diagnosis connected to a “mental health disorder,” according to the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2015–2016). These data—local, state, and national—suggested a growing crisis among college students, nearly two years before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response, we included more wellness conversations in our co-curricular programming, starting with “Tuesday Conversations,” when first-year students congregate to discuss topics ranging from college success to Hindu goddesses to Egyptian mummies. In 2019 and 2020, we added sessions on stress, thriving in college, the importance of play, stress and the brain, and faith and spirituality. In 2020, we raised \$48,512 from donors for professionally led mindfulness and meditation sessions for honors students, which are regular features of our co-curricular first-year programming that was recently recognized as the winner of the 2022 NWCCU Beacon Award for Excellence in Student Achievement and Success.

Student wellness guided our 2020 common read, the text that all incoming honors students read before enrollment: Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Natural Causes: An Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Killing Ourselves to Live Longer*. Our first-year seminars also integrated student well-being into our textual selections. One seminar read Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* to bring up the critically important but often undiscussed topic of suicide. Another read selections from Jon Kabat-Zinn’s *Waking Up* to help students develop mindfulness habits. The goal was to destigmatize mental health challenges by bringing them into everyday conversation and by positioning faculty as allies in students’ self-care work.



Student wellness fits within this DEI discussion for three reasons. One, if students are unwell, any academic or programmatic initiative is a non-starter. Two, underrepresented and minoritized students suffer from mental health challenges at higher levels than students with a majority racial/ethnic identity, a family college legacy, or above-average socioeconomic status even as they are also less likely to receive care (Zamudio-Suarez). Finally, a global pandemic, long overdue reckonings with racial injustice, the climate crisis, and widespread economic insecurity mean that it is a rare student indeed who is not facing some type of existential threat (Eisenberg et al.).

## **Survey Findings Around Classroom Experiences and Co-Curricular Conversations**

Much of our DEI work happens in the classroom. Student perceptions of our curriculum were illuminating. As shown in Table 2, students reported curricular diversity, but also indicated there was room for improvement in disability, sexual orientation, and class: 82%, 70%, and 43% of students indicated they had either no classes—or only one class—with content in those respective areas. The qualitative sections of the survey allowed students to elaborate:

As an institution, I think its representatives like to “talk” about diversity. But I don’t think we always follow through with that talk. Many of my honors readings focused on ancient and early-modern texts. Most of them were by men who were writing from a rationalist perspective. I think there were missed opportunities. However, there are classes that take a diverse approach. (Stewart)

Undoubtedly, students have different definitions of diversity. One student wrote that they wanted more “classes based in classical Western mythos/belief systems” (Stewart). This student might have agreed with another student’s critique of the curriculum in the honors college: “There is respect for differing beliefs in the Honors College if those beliefs fall on the spectrum between left and far-left. Very little in terms of course content or discussion is

accommodative of views that do not align with the current sentiments of humanities academics” (Stewart).

Clearly, we needed to have hard conversations about what diversity means. We found that students did not always feel confident in such conversations, with 15% indicating difficulty in challenging others on issues of discrimination and 16% indicating difficulty in educating others about social issues. These numbers were not alarmingly high, but they suggested room for growth. They also sparked faculty conversations around modeling the art of civil disagreement and dialoguing across difference. Two student comments bring this issue into focus:

I am concerned that not all students feel like they have a voice in honors due to fears of being shut down during conversation. Students still believe that they must have the “right” answer to speak, and that isn’t the spirit of honors. (Stewart)

I have spoken to many students who feel like they have been attacked or forced to make it appear like they believe just like everyone else because they fear the repercussions. I do not believe this atmosphere is a positive one for learning or making change in our society. (Stewart)

These comments suggested dissatisfaction with our ability to dialogue and learn across difference. Accordingly, we added an objective to our strategic plan for diversity: “Improve opportunities for students to engage questions around diversity in learning settings” (Westminster, “Diversity”). Faculty participated in several workshops to help us better dialogue across difference, led by our Faculty Fellow for DEI. The first focused on engaging healthy conflict in the classroom. One participant commented she was reconsidering what it means to be collegial, explaining, “In this institution, I think we focus on being nice more than we focus on justice. The conversation we had today went a long way in convincing me that conflict might be necessary to advance equity across our campus.”

Another workshop helped faculty develop intersectional teaching opportunities, including drafting specific language to use during challenging classroom conversations. One participant underscored the value of creating and practicing a script. She explained, “In tense moments, I sometimes lose my words. But if I have practiced saying something, I’m more confident that I’ll speak up and use a tense moment as a teaching moment.” Continuing this trend, two honors college faculty received funding to attend a 2022 Council on Independent Colleges workshop entitled “Deliberation and Debate: Advancing Civil Discourse through First-Year Courses” and then shared resources from that experience at the 2022 honors college faculty retreat.

**TABLE 2. STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: *HOW MANY COURSES HAVE YOU TAKEN AT THE HONORS COLLEGE AT WESTMINSTER THAT INCLUDED THE FOLLOWING?***

Content of Honors College Courses	None	One	Two-Four	Five or more
Opportunities to Study and Serve Communities in Need (e.g., Service Learning)	70.4% (100)	19.7% (28)	9.9% (14)	0.0% (0)
Opportunities for Intensive Dialogue between Students with Different Backgrounds and Beliefs	10.0% (14)	20.0% (28)	61.4% (86)	8.6% (12)
Materials/Readings about Gender	8.5% (12)	26.8% (38)	57.8% (82)	7.0% (10)
Materials/Readings about Race/Ethnicity	8.5% (12)	22.5% (32)	61.3% (87)	7.8% (11)
Materials/Readings about Socioeconomic Class Differences	10.6% (15)	31.7% (45)	50.7% (72)	7.0% (10)
Materials/Readings about Privilege	16.4% (23)	24.3% (34)	52.9% (74)	6.4% (9)
Materials/Readings about Sexual Identity	33.3% (47)	36.9% (52)	27.7% (39)	2.1% (3)
Materials/Readings about Disability	50.7% (71)	30.7% (43)	17.1% (24)	1.4% (2)

N = 140–142 (7–9 skipped)

In an earlier retreat held in 2020, we moved to transforming our syllabi to reflect DEI principles. Our workshop encouraged faculty to consider the colonial context of knowledge creation in higher education and to identify readings and assignments to challenge the tenets of classical thinkers. One faculty member explained, “For years, we’ve talked about syllabus diversification, adding more voices and perspectives to our syllabi. But decolonization suggests that we are moving against the unethical occupation of knowledge. That’s a very different starting point for me.”

Students have also become directly involved in creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive community in honors. One objective of our strategic plan is to “increase honors student exposure to campus conversations around diversity issues” (Westminster, “Diversity”). This desire led to the creation of the Honors College Diversity Coordinator, a student-held position. Sophie Caligiuri undertook this role in 2018. Under her leadership, honors deepened connections with the McNair Program, Queer Compass, the Feminist Club, Black Student Union, Legacy Scholars Program, Walkways to Westminster, and the Society for the Advancement of Chicanx/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science. Honors students co-sponsored panel discussions and keynote speakers but also backed informal strategies, such as shared study spaces and student networking. Caligiuri explained that she and her SHC colleagues wanted to fight the stereotype that honors was exclusive: “Connecting honors with other student groups meant that someone could always find a friend, or someone who shared their identity, and maybe feel more comfortable. That was our goal, that people would feel at home in honors” (Caligiuri).

That desire to create a community “that felt like home” was the brainchild behind Chai and Chat, an initiative led by the SHC president and informed by a tradition in her Somalian culture. In 2019, the SHC aimed to weave diversity into all honors programming in a way that was more inviting and less intimidating. They marketed the monthly events as opportunities to drop by, grab something hot to drink, eat some snacks—and chat! Student leaders invited people whose identities were being highlighted during monthly

heritage events to join the conversation, discussing Black history, Asian American and Pacific Islander heritage, and the intersection of Latinx and queer identities. Student leaders invited guests to join these conversations, but to not burden people's busy lives, the guests could choose the format. Some chose panels, others formal presentations, while some preferred to chat informally.

One key benefit of these partnerships was that programming became more collective, fostering deeper connections between honors and other campus members. As Caligiuri explained, "Some people might steer away from honors events because they felt that their place on campus was elsewhere. But blending our events made honors more accessible" (Caligiuri).

A focus on decentralized and inclusive practices continues to characterize student-led programming in honors. The current student diversity coordinator, Kiva Call-Feit, has been working toward creating a student diversity council. It will help institutionalize DEI in student leadership. Like most honors processes, this involves considerable conversation. As Call-Feit explained, "I'm most excited to foster discussion and open conversation because I believe that is the way to make change" (Call-Feit).

## CONCLUSION

In NCHC's recent position paper, *Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory of Inclusion*, longtime leaders in honors education assert, "Honors has long been a space for pushing boundaries and being creative about the educational journey" (National Collegiate Honors Council 8). The educational journeys that our honors institutions have taken—both being PWIs—means that we started on an elitist path, one that privileged a certain type of student, excluded large portions of the potential student population, and overlooked extensive talent. We are changing course by infusing DEI into our everyday practices. Westminster Honors College and Lewis Honors College at the University of Kentucky are advancing DEI by recruiting more diverse students, faculty, and staff; researching student, faculty, and staff experiences of belonging; increasing cultural competency-building programming and

curricular options; implementing increasingly holistic admissions and tailored advising; and creating true accountability around DEI efforts. We are creating mechanisms for ongoing reflection and assessment about what we must improve to create affirming, inclusive environments. This enterprise requires frank conversations about what needs to change and sincere commitments to act on the fruits of those contemplations, real action aligned with clearly articulated values affirming diversity and inclusion. Talk is not enough. Hoffman and Mitchell, whose work highlights how diversity talk is often substituted for actual structural change, explain, “Language has come to stand in for effects” (288). Making DEI an everyday practice ensures that we take actions to address problems that undermine the culture of belonging in the diverse communities we aim to create in honors education.

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