CHAPTER FOUR

Online Faculty Professional Development and Community as Nexus

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INTRODUCTION

Since the spring of 2020, much has been discussed at academic conferences and written in blogs, journals, and books about the challenges of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education. Honors education has not been immune to the hardships. Virtually all honors programs and colleges worldwide—mirroring their

home institutions' reactive protocols—have had to redesign how to continue to deliver their courses, activities, and benefits throughout the pandemic and, looking ahead, in a changed post-pandemic world while retaining what makes their work distinctly honors. The challenges have not been solely pedagogical or organizational: honors professional development has also experienced obstacles that have stimulated new thinking about how to ensure continued faculty growth in the field. In 2020, for example, both the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) meeting in Dallas, Texas (U.S.A.), and the International Conference on Talent Development in Groningen, the Netherlands, were canceled to prevent the dangerous spreading of the coronavirus; both were repurposed or rescheduled as totally online events. The same was true for the highly successful Honors International Faculty Institute (HIFI), held four times before in person but converted to the Honors International Faculty Learning Online (HIFLO) institute, conducted twice since the widespread cancellations of other in-person faculty development opportunities. All the NCHC's professional offerings have followed the same pattern during the same period.

Hence, while attention to teaching skills and methods of promoting student learning is a necessary aim of general faculty training, a pressing reality is that honors has had to rethink how to deliver such professional development options to ensure ongoing innovation and, perhaps more urgently, how to preserve the valuable sense of community that undergirds much of what defines the honors enterprise. Consequently, our emphasis in this chapter presents some ideas for adapting honors and other professional development efforts to our evolving post-pandemic world while preserving the core principle of community that is so essential in honors. We use the creation of HIFLO as our main practical example, but we propose that the experiences and strategies we describe can be modified and used as the basis for creating additional honors and general faculty development occasions with community at the center.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY: A FRAMEWORK

Why focus on community? We contend that community is more than a lucky byproduct of professional development activities: it is a vital

component that is grounded in sound honors pedagogy and practices, and community building should be a foremost consideration in designing professional growth in honors, whether in person or online. As Wolfensberger says, "By 'community,' we mean the sense of community that is created through face-to-face, reciprocal interaction[s] between a lecturer and students and among lecturers and students themselves"; such interactions within "an engaged community," she maintains, are "difficult to explain or to operationalize and have been missed during the pandemic" ("The Power" 1). Given such challenges to building community, especially in an online environment, we determined to anchor our professional development efforts on creating community. Our resolve is supported by a framework derived from an abundance of evidence-based research on the importance of community in honors and general teaching, learning, and organizational pursuits.

One key source is Wolfensberger's model of the three "pillars" of honors education: "creating community, enhancing academic competence, and offering freedom" (*Teaching* 37). Wolfensberger points out that "community and connectedness are ubiquitous in the honors literature" and help to "create a constructive atmosphere of academic rigor" (*Teaching* 25–26). In a later piece, reflecting on the effects of the pandemic on academic community building, she adds that the interactions that occur in a positive community are "the key to personal, academic and professional growth and transformation" ("The Power" 1). Such observations apply equally to professional development for faculty as they do for relationships among students and between teachers and students. Faculty—especially in the dynamic, creative, risk-taking culture of honors—are eager to learn from the lessons of pivoting to remote or online instruction during the pandemic, but as Wolfensberger indicates they also hunger for the power of face-to-face human exchanges:

> [P]eople miss the sense of community…. [W]e are hoping for a better post-COVID-19 world where there is a focus on building a sense of community. Many lecturers and students do not believe that returning to the 'old normal' is realistic. We want to keep the good aspects of online learning after the pandemic is over, but the need to build a sense of community has not simply disappeared. We are keen to make progress and to develop a vision. ("The Power" 2)

Indeed, in many ways, the creation of HIFLO has been a response to the call for a vision of how to design professional development that retains a strong focus on community. In fact, of the three virtual HIFLO events we have led since the emergence of travel and social distancing restrictions, two have concentrated on the theme of building community in both face-to-face and online modes of interaction.

Another very recent and influential source in our framework is Felten and Lambert's book on *Relationship-Rich Education*. Although the authors concentrate on undergraduates as the beneficiaries of the kind of relationship-rich community that has "the power to be transformational for individuals, for our institutions, and for our world," their argument stands as a reminder that faculty, too, benefit from growth opportunities that foster the kind of "human-to-human connection" that many feel has been lost or at least altered by shifts to online interactions (160–61). As the authors reveal in their coda prompted by the unplanned pandemic, the effects on community of going virtual have stressed not only students but also faculty: "From our own personal experiences interacting remotely with our students, colleagues, and extended families during these past weeks of isolation and social distancing, we feel deeply the loss of sustained, authentic human connection. The sense of loss is real for many educators …" (162). Felten and Lambert propose several "guiding principles" for creating a robust culture of interpersonal as well as academic and personal community. The principles include the following: members of a supportive community should "experience genuine welcome and deep care," should recognize that "relationships are a powerful means to inspire [learning]," and should "develop webs of significant relationships" (Felten and Lambert 10). We believe that in the design of not just the topic of two HIFLO events centered on community but also the various intentional interactive strategies and activities of the online institutes, we have incorporated the principles outlined by Felten and Lambert. As we describe later in this chapter, we have included in our virtual HIFLO (and in the original pre-pandemic and, we hope, post-pandemic HIFI version) multiple ways of welcoming our participants and highlighting the significance of care and respect in our interactions; we have used the power of collaboration for sharing insights, tips, resources, and inspiration; and we have provided diverse options for networking and staying in touch after each event, including Zoom and YouTube recordings, open-access Google document files,

Slack postings, LinkedIn social networking, and, of course, email. In short, HIFI and HIFLO are relationship-rich professional development opportunities that deliver content information and provide space for learning and practicing skills; more importantly, they actually model how and why community is an essential facet of effective faculty development in honors and beyond.

Other valuable resources—such as Cox; Eib and Miller; Johnson et al.; Massetti and Lobert-Jones; McCabe; Neff; Nussbaum; Palmer; Sacks; Equity Unbound's list of activities; and others—factor into our framework for prioritizing the value of community and team building in working collaboratively and interactively with faculty to improve practice. Even more sources include Sosniak; Van Eijl et al.; Van Lankveld and Volman; Wals; and Zhao and Kuh. These works uncover additional aspects of skills for community building as a transformational dimension of professional development. Influenced by such research, in our HIFLO 2021 institute, we shared the following attributes that are characteristic of an engaged community of practice working on improving teaching, learning, and collegiality on both personal and professional levels:

- Open-mindedness;
- A drive for seeking diverse perspectives and honoring the dignity of difference;
- A desire for making sense of complex issues;
- An ability to develop an inner compass to help guide individual and collective practical and ethical decisions as professionals;
- A strong sense of compassion for others and, as Neff advocates, for oneself (*Self-Compassion*).

Such key attributes are more than simply the basis for developing skills necessary for building community: they are, in fact, habits of being and knowing, as Palmer argues:

> I want to try to connect concepts of community to questions of epistemology, which I believe are the central questions for any institution engaged in a mission of knowing, teaching, and

learning. How do we know? How do we learn? Under what conditions and with what validity?

I believe that it is here at the epistemological core of our knowledge and our processes of knowing that our powers for forming or deforming human consciousness are to be found. I believe that it is here, in our modes of knowing, that we shape souls by the shape of our knowledge. It is here that the idea of community must ultimately take root and have impact if it is to reshape the doing of higher education. (22)

When the key attributes and skills named above are combined with the lessons learned from our other framework resources, we arrive at the drivers that have motivated us to offer HIFI and HIFLO institutes as vital community-building opportunities in person as well as online. Community, after all, has at its center the directive of love: love of what we do, love of our disciplines, love of our honors and institutional contexts, love of our students, love of each other, love of ourselves. In his recognizable voice, Palmer puts it this way: "If you ask what holds community together, what makes this capacity for relatedness possible, the only honest answer I can give brings me to that dangerous realm called the spiritual. The only answer I can give is that what makes community possible is love" (25).

HIFLO AS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

In summer 2020, we planned to offer what would have been our fifth HIFI, an in-person, international, highly interactive occasion for teachers, researchers, and leaders to engage in presentations, experiential activities, place-as-text explorations, collaborative group work, and reflective exercises; attendees could also showcase projects designed to improve teaching, learning, and programming in honors. Suddenly, the coronavirus upended our world, and we had to reimagine the institute that we had previously organized four times alternately at Hanze University of Applied Sciences (Netherlands) and Texas

Christian University (U.S.A.). As an alternative, we decided to create two fully online versions of HIFLO with free registration to encourage participation and create resources accessible to all members of our international community: one focused on "Creating Community—Experiences from Honors," the other on "Remote Honors—Teaching for Deep Virtual Learning." To maintain a high degree of collaborative interaction, we limited enrollment to twenty-five participants each to allow for dynamic group work, online chat room discussions, and showcasing of work—in essence, to promote a strong community. In the end, fifty-two faculty members from forty-six higher education institutions on three continents participated in the two HIFLO sessions.

We updated and reprised the HIFLO event on community in summer 2021 while interest in the subject continued to soar as teachers, students, programs, and institutions struggled with and continued to face the effects of a long, draining year of social, physical, financial, and emotional stress. In both instances of HIFLO seminars on community, we used the Zoom platform, enabling us to see all our participants and preserve a sense of community, use the breakout room feature for small group work, interact through the chat function, display shared screens of presentation slides, view selected videos, and generate written ideas. One of our main objectives has been to make sure that participants recognize that we are not only delivering information and asking them to collaborate and present as a faculty learning community but also modeling for them the strategies and tools that we propose as viable approaches to online honors pedagogy with community building at the center. Thus, we have not simply suggested applying virtual tools for building community, developing online discussion forums, taking advantage of small-group work, tapping the power of reflection, and showcasing participants' learning: we have actively engaged our colleagues in using the tools and practicing celebrated pedagogies of honors education in an online environment. Such meta-level engagement has helped point the way forward to reclaiming and sustaining a vibrant sense of honors community in a post-pandemic scenario.

Both HIFLO events on the theme of community are available as public video files posted after each gathering. The videos are available here:

- Creating Online Community: Experiences from Honors (Wednesday, 17 Jun. 2020), youtube.com/watch?v=ikpbSrVUZnA;

- Creating Honors Online Community (Wednesday, 23 Jun. 2021), youtube.com/watch?v=O2MnZQxtf3Y.

We also put supplementary materials—such as the presentation slide decks, handouts, selected articles, sample assignments, lists of reading resources and websites, and more—in an open, editable Google Drive folder so that our colleagues can benefit from freely sharing additional tips and insights as they revisit the various items in the different folders. The link to the Google Drive folders for 2020 and 2021 can be found embedded in the presentation slides that appear in the videos, and they can be accessed directly here: tiny.cc/4fh3vz.

Was HIFLO 2020 successful? Reading participants' feedback, we think HIFLO fulfilled a need and offered a suitable framework for faculty development. We integrated the feedback in our *Journal of the European Honors Council* (*JEHC*) article (Zubizarreta et al.), and we included comments such as the following:

- I enjoyed building community with you today.

- Thank you SO much for the HIFLO events you organized so brilliantly! Indeed, I may say that I have learned a lot of new teaching and learning methods. And, most importantly, HIFLO meetings contributed to creating new ties in our honors community, thus making it stronger. Thank you very much again!

In 2021, we thought we could improve the session by including students' voices—after all, building community becomes more powerful when all parties involved are part of the conversation. Thus, we invited five honors students from different countries, including the United States, Russia, Norway, the Netherlands, and Austria. We made sure that a student was present in each of our breakout rooms

to emphasize the importance of having both teachers and students in a conversation about building community. Additionally, HIFI and HIFLO both have an international dimension in their core, helping to embody the importance of Sacks's "dignity of difference" as described in his 2003 book. The resulting open-mindedness prompted by the multidisciplinary and multicultural background of the students helped the participants to make sense of complex issues of pedagogy and community building, reminding us of our common humanity and common purpose in honors education.

To facilitate the inclusion of students' voices in our institute, we organized a virtual Fishbowl experience (Zubizarreta) asking students to converse freely about the various ways that they felt community was successfully built in their honors programs during the year's required isolation and social distancing. The teacher participants just listened. The online environment limited some of the typical in-person, interactive spontaneity of the Fishbowl activity as students took turns expressing their thoughts. Nevertheless, the students confirmed for us the importance of community and shared various student-led activities to keep their respective communities strong during the pandemic, ideas that could continue to be useful in post-pandemic circumstances. Their insights and suggestions are fully available in the 2021 "Creating Honors Online Community" HIFLO video (youtube.com/watch?v=O2MnZQxtf3Y).

LESSONS FROM VIRTUAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

We have learned many important lessons about overcoming challenges and implementing guiding frameworks while organizing and delivering HIFLO sessions. Some of the challenges are probably no different from those encountered by all directors of teaching and learning centers and other faculty development professionals accustomed to interacting with colleagues in face-to-face workshops, conference sessions, and individual consultations. The required shift to how we traditionally have created community and delivered professional development opportunities has not been easy. Perhaps Wolfensberger says it best in her reflections on the hurdles of trying to replicate real human

interaction in the technological, virtual environment spawned by the pandemic:

> Despite all the innovative solutions that lecturers have found to the challenges posed by coronavirus restrictions, it is clear that creating a sense of community has not been easy. Interaction with others as the key to personal, academic, and professional growth is impeded by the lack of face-to-face contact. Online learning often involves the standardization and compartmentalization of content and interaction: this is useful when it comes to labeling, but it is inadequate when it comes to social contact and personal development, not least because the peer group is no longer [present] as soon as the online session is over. We must acknowledge this [problem] and focus more on 'what am I doing and why?' ("The Power" 3)

Some of the important lessons we have learned in providing an online professional development institute for an international audience of honors educators are outlined below. The following points are about the preparation of the online professional development sessions on the theme of community; we have shared some of them previously in a report in the *Journal of the European Honors Council* (Zubizarreta et al.), but we hope that they will serve here as useful guideposts for designing such opportunities after the ravages of the pandemic on our treasured sense of honors community:

1. Carefully consider the issue of different time zones. We selected an hour that we felt was the best compromise possible, given that our participants spanned seventeen time zones. For example, one of our participants logged in at 4 a.m., while another logged in at 9 p.m., a considerable challenge for both.

2. Another lesson related to time is that, despite our meticulous planning for a ninety-minute session and with many concessions to give up content we felt was important, we still wished we had more time to allow for more open discussion and more attention to group work and reflection. We would have preferred perhaps an hour

and forty-five minutes or as much as two hours with a
ten-minute break midway.

3. It took time for the authors/facilitators to reach a shared
    vision concerning our HIFLO online sessions. For
    instance, we had several conversations about whether
    to livestream the HIFLO events or not. We decided not
    to livestream but to make our HIFLO seminars public
    afterward on YouTube after making sure that participants
    consented to be recorded and that we cleared any
    copyright issues with music and other shared media.
    Such a decision has consequences for the organization
    and delivery of the seminar; for instance, we were unable
    to record all the different Zoom breakout sessions, so
    they are not available on the video, even though we
    wanted to share the full experience of the seminar with
    the YouTube viewers.

4. Preparing HIFLO seminars of ninety minutes each
    took us at least three full, busy days for each session,
    not to mention the time each of us spent preparing and
    revising our plans before and after our virtual meetings.
    Such intensive investment of time mirrors many
    teachers' experience that teaching and learning, as well as
    engagement in professional development online, require
    considerable amounts of time; some faculty may even say
    that COVID-19's call for going virtual in all facets of our
    work as educators has doubled or tripled our working
    time.

5. Practicing the various activities we had scheduled was
    also crucial, alerting us to technical glitches, delays, and
    other problems we could troubleshoot before the live
    sessions. Such trial runs allowed us to make changes in
    our plans for maximum success. Of course, during the
    pandemic, most of us became more digitally literate, but
    we still have much to learn, and there can be many digital
    hurdles.

6. We used the Zoom platform for the virtual meetings, but not all participants were familiar with the technology; some universities, for instance, do not permit the use of Zoom. In addition to sharing guidelines for using the selected virtual meeting platform, advance notice of the various online tools to be used during the seminar helps participants to be ready for the various assignments and activities. We deliberately engaged our members in using Zoom's chat functions, whiteboard, and breakout rooms, but we added other tools such as Slack and Mentimeter to model how they can be used to enhance online teaching, learning, and community building. We wanted participants to know ahead of time what applications to download and how to use one's computer and other devices simultaneously to enable multiple screen tasks. As facilitators, we, too, learned much from the process of coordinating the online institutes and discovering ways of using technology to offer our content and maintain a focus on effective community.

7. Participants were asked to prepare themselves for the sessions by watching several short movie clips related to our theme of community on the European Co-Talent website (cotalent.eu). Topics included creating a collaborative atmosphere for students, stimulating active teaching and learning, providing useful feedback, appreciating questions and remarks—all designed to promote community in both in-person and remote instruction. This kind of easy homework appeared manageable for most participants. Watching the movies created a shared experience and knowledge base at the start of each seminar, which helped to open fruitful conversations and to encourage a growing sense of community. We also are aware, however, that not all participants will prepare themselves diligently in all cases (just as in class), which may influence the outcomes.

8. Following Felten and Lambert's recommendations, we created an environment of genuine welcome and deep care by asking participants to introduce themselves in the beginning and respond to a short icebreaker question. The icebreaker generated laughter or insights, inspiring all to engage in the community and to learn from each other. We also later reflected on the time required by icebreakers, since with twenty-five participants some icebreakers take a long time and are less effective online.

9. We politely asked all members to enable their device's camera so that all our participants could enjoy seeing each other and benefit from connecting a name and a face, a not-so-small encouragement to maintain relationships after the seminar, perhaps at future honors conferences. Instead of lingering on a dominant slide on the screen, we would quickly switch to viewing all our participants to continue fostering a sense of community, even if only virtual.

10. We insisted on making the seminars as interactive as possible with the use of chat functions and breakout rooms for discussion. Our plan worked quite well, but it was difficult to keep up with the chat posts while trying to maintain the pace of the live presentation. Also, the breakout rooms, especially energized by the presence of a student in each room, were a highlight—generating many practical ideas, strengthening community, creating a genuine environment of collaborative learning, and producing inspiring showcased outcomes. But transitioning from the full group in the central meeting "room" to the various groups was tricky and took more time than anticipated. Having an expert with technological skills on our team of presenters was an invaluable asset.

11. Given the work involved in both seminars—taxing participants' attention, interest, and stamina—we incorporated some physical and mindful activities early and midway through the seminars. The purpose of such interludes was to remind our colleagues that both community and deep learning are enhanced through kinesthetic exercise and restful moments for calm reflection and refreshment.

12. In each breakout session, we asked each team to co-create a relevant artifact, which fostered a sense of community among the team members by prompting them to engage in a creative process (Wolfensberger and Vroom) as each team anticipated presenting their ideas/creations/projects to the entire group. The projects were creative, inspiring, and practical, helping participants to brainstorm approaches to building community in honors. Some of the projects presented by the groups included the following:

    a. Establishing an opportunity for students to publish collaborative podcasts that help create community as well as deepen and extend content learning;

    b. Creating a virtual advising platform to promote closer relationships between faculty and students;

    c. Setting up an art gallery where teachers and students can exhibit personal expressions of challenges and triumphs;

    d. Using community-of-practice models to establish focus groups on strategies for community building;

    e. Finding ways of redesigning honors orientation as an online retreat to highlight community or "connectivity" over delivering program or college information;

      f.   Developing ways of "humanizing" faculty and student members of an honors community by encouraging shared personal moments, images of family or pets, favorite foods, and such while interacting online.

13. A supremely important lesson from all HIFLO sessions is making sure to incorporate opportunities for critical reflection, allowing participants to think about not just what they have learned in the seminar but how and why they will synthesize and apply new ideas, strategies, and tools to enhance honors teaching, learning, and community whether in an online format or in future, post-pandemic, face-to-face interactions. We encouraged such reflection in both sessions on community, using the available chat, breakout rooms, polling, whiteboard, and open discussion functions in the Zoom platform; we invited our members to think, write, and share as they reflected on the various topics we discussed in real time. As presenters, we, too, engaged in critical reflection after each seminar to share what we learned from the experience and how to improve our work. For instance, we discovered that keeping time when participants present during face-to-face sessions feels different and a little friendlier than when a session leader must stop presenters abruptly during online sessions, which can be more difficult.

14. After the seminars, we urged participants to join Slack, contribute to the Google Drive folder, connect on LinkedIn, and use email as a way of sustaining our reflective and collaborative faculty learning community, creating a web of significant relationships, as previously suggested by Felten and Lambert.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We opened this chapter by expressing our goal to share ideas and experiences related to the design of dynamic, interactive

professional development opportunities that focus on learning skills for managing remote or online teaching but more importantly that create a relationship-rich sense of community. Our HIFLO model is a successful example in honors, but it offers reasonably adaptable strategies that can be used in future virtual professional development ventures inside or outside of honors. No matter what other topics may be addressed in later HIFI or HIFLO seminars, the essential principle of community will always be a vital component.

Professional development without community is a dry, rote accumulation and exercise of technical skills without what Palmer would call spirit or love. By reporting on the process of creating our Honors International Faculty Learning Online (HIFLO) seminars, we aim to inspire others to engage in similar endeavors, thus enriching not only their local community but the international honors community. In short, we built HIFI and HIFLO as relationship-rich professional development opportunities that deliver content and provide space for learning and practicing skills; more significantly, the sessions actually model how and why community is an essential facet of effective faculty development in honors and beyond.

We look forward to other HIFI or HIFLO occasions, in person or online, as professional development opportunities to learn together with enthusiastic, creative, dedicated honors friends. Our aim will always be to advance honors education in all its complexity with an unwavering commitment to the core values of our community.

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HONORS ONLINE

Teaching, Learning, and Building Community Virtually in Honors Education

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