

CHAPTER ELEVEN

**Cultivating Delight, Crossing Divides,
and Solving Impossible Problems:
Lessons Learned from a Year
of Virtual Conferences**

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While the rapid transition from in-person classes to a fully online modality in response to COVID-19 presented a host of immediate challenges for everyone in higher education, honors programs, colleges, and organizations in particular faced an additional set of concerns. These challenges included, in the short term, how to create meaningful virtual alternatives to experiences such as conferences, symposia, and colloquia, and, in the long term, how to integrate lessons learned from these virtual experiments to enhance the academic experience of students in the future. Traditionally, in-person, discussion-driven networking events like regional and national conferences are at the very core of what sets honors apart; shifting them to online platforms seemed daunting. And yet, collaboratively and creatively, honors persevered, in the process discovering innovations, practices, and emphases with which we can reshape our sense of what is possible going forward. This chapter highlights some of the lessons learned from a year of virtual conferences by three different honors organizations, the Southern Regional Honors Council (SRHC), the Northeast Regional Honors Council (NRHC), and the Kentucky Honors Roundtable (KHR).

The faculty and administrators on the organizing committees for these three conferences all came from institutions that focus on in-person instead of online learning, especially for honors education. That inexperience, combined with our collective experience muddling our way through Zoom classes and meetings during the early stages of the pandemic, primed us to see the prospect of online conferencing in terms of deficiency, as an inevitably poor approximation of what we could deliver were we able to meet in person. More specifically, we had come to see the so-called pivot to online education as deficient in two key respects. First, there was our profound sense of isolation and disconnection from our colleagues and students, many of whom had become to us anonymous and distant participants in our classes and committees, isolated with cameras off and microphones muted. Second, and somewhat related, a lack of joy emanated from every meeting and every interaction being scheduled. As we moved further into the planning process, however, we challenged ourselves to see the online modality differently. What if instead of *pivoting* (a word we had all come to view with suspicion), we were able to *pirouette*, creatively

leveraging the shift to a virtual environment in order to address these same perceived deficiencies. How might we use online tools to bridge distances or to make connections that would be impossible in an in-person setting? How could we introduce spontaneity, surprise, and even delight into the more typically serious business of an academic conference?

KHR, which ordinarily convenes twice a year, held its last pre-pandemic conference in late February of 2020, right before everything changed. One hundred forty-one students and faculty from twelve different Kentucky honors programs and colleges gathered on the campus of the University of Louisville (U of L) for what, unbeknownst to them at the time, would be the largest in-person event most would attend for more than a year. Students at this last KHR enjoyed all of the opportunities of a typical conference: they mingled and networked at a dinner, shared creative work and research at oral and poster presentations, and saw a memorable U of L Theater production of John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* at the historic Belknap Playhouse, which was built in 1874.

SRHC was not as fortunate. Its spring 2020 conference, which would have been hosted in Birmingham, Alabama, from March 18-21, was abruptly canceled just a week before its scheduled beginning, leaving organizers little time to adapt. Students were given the opportunity to submit an electronic version of their presentations, but relatively few availed themselves of that opportunity, with only 39 out of the 337 presentations in the program migrating to the online format. Although web traffic on the SRHC website through that April suggests visitors viewed this content, it was essentially a static archive, with none of the synchronous, face-to-face interaction and feedback that are among the most valuable aspects of the conference experience for our students.

NRHC was also forced to cancel its in-person conference, which would have been hosted in Albany, New York, from April 2-5. Students were offered the opportunity to send their work to *Illuminate*, the undergraduate journal of NRHC, for publication on a 2020 Conference page.

Thirty-nine conference presentations were posted out of the 405 accepted proposals. (See illuminatenrhc.com/2020-conference-archive for an archive of these presentations.) Students who participated were

grateful for the opportunity, and all accepted presenters were informed that their presentation would be automatically accepted for the 2021 NRHC conference.

Planning for fully virtual 2021 versions of all three conferences began in earnest shortly thereafter.¹ Organizing committees from all groups were tasked not just with figuring out how to translate the components of an in-person conference into an online setting, but also with exploring the extent to which that online setting might facilitate innovations not possible within the parameters of a conventional academic conference. To what extent might virtual conferencing open up possibilities for reimagining the work of these organizations? How might the pandemic-induced upending of the status quo creatively disrupt our assumptions about what a conference can and should be?

With little experience among the organizing committees in planning or even attending online conferences, it was inevitable that many of our lessons learned would be technological in nature. And yet, in addition to the insights gained about the nuts and bolts of running conferences over Microsoft Teams (the platform we used for KHR) and Zoom (which we used for SRHC and NRHC), the organizing committees discovered ways in which they could go beyond simply relocating conventional conference content online by venturing into new and exciting conceptual territory. For KHR, that new territory was inspired by poet and author Ross Gay's pathbreaking collection of "essayettes," *The Book of Delights* (2019), the subject of the conference plenary we hosted in partnership with the University of Kentucky Lewis Honors College. While KHR's modest budget would normally not allow us to invite a speaker of Gay's stature, the online format and funding from the Lewis Honors College enabled us to share the opportunity to hear from one of the country's most celebrated contemporary poets with honors colleges and programs across the commonwealth. Given how unpleasant the past year had been for most of us as we struggled with the losses, disruptions, and anxieties from the pandemic, the timing could not have been more felicitous. In the spirit of Gay's observation that "the more you study delight, the more delight there is to study" (xii), we chose to make the cultivation of delight central to our spring conference. Delightfulness and, indeed, fun, may seem peripheral not just to the serious academic business of sharing and receiving feedback on research at conferences, but also more generally

to the lives of our honors students, who, as any honors administrator is aware, are often laser-focused on grades and achievement; are over-represented in service organizations, student leadership, internships, and other obligations; and are skeptical of invitations to slow down and attend to self-care and mental and emotional wellness. We considered: *What would it look like to center delight as a practice and ethos within honors, and to do so in a year of so much stress and anguish?*

As NRHC and SRHC considered their options, we became aware of a shared desire to cross divides—regional, in particular—in ways that might address the present moment of racial crisis while concurrently breaking down regional divisions that have a long history in the United States, including in the NCHC. For SRHC, centering the urgent calls for racial justice that followed the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor was important. With our location both in the Southern region and in the privileged institutional space of honors education, we had a dual responsibility, the organizing committee realized, to amplify these calls for justice and to scrutinize how our own operations are implicated in structural inequalities. How might honors education, instead of being another divide that separates us, facilitate the crossing of divides? And how might the online format of the virtual conference enable us to see and cross divides that we might not recognize or be able to bridge in a conventional year? Aiming for intentional cross-regional collaboration, the SRHC decided on a theme of “Crossing Divides” and invited the Northeast region to participate in a unique conference that maximized the virtual environment. Our goal was to create a starting point through which we might challenge the deep-seated structural divisions in honors, in academia, in the United States, and in the world. By gathering virtually for shared presentations and co-created conversation, we worked together to keep recently intensified regional, racial, religious, and global human divisions front and center. We planned sessions that would promote dialogue and shared stories as well as the opportunity for the proximity that Bryan Stevenson emphasizes is so important to mutual understanding and what philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, writer of the *New York Times* “Ethicist” column, has referred to as the “endless shared conversation” of friendship. In the end, we crossed divides by fostering proximity across regions that is normally not part of our smaller regional meetings (qtd. in Tippett).

For NRHC, the conference chair set the theme of “Infrequently Asked Questions: Finding Solutions to Impossible Problems.” While this theme certainly spoke to the endless questions surrounding the pandemic, it also invited proposers to tackle problems across disciplines, including systemic racism, climate change, partisanship, immigration, and more. With this emphasis in mind, the NRHC planning committee selected for the conference’s common read Cody McDevitt’s *Banished from Johnstown: Racist Backlash in Pennsylvania*, which tells the story of one of the worst civil rights injustices in Western Pennsylvania history. In 1923, in response to the fatal shooting of four policemen, the mayor of Johnstown ordered every African- American and Mexican immigrant who had lived in the city for less than seven years to leave. They were given less than a day to move or would face crippling fines or jail time and were forced out at gunpoint. An estimated two thousand people uprooted their lives in response to this racist edict. This book and its author, who spoke about his research at one of the conference sessions, addressed the problem of systemic racism. This problem is so deep-seated that it seems “impossible”; it is a problem requiring creative and interdisciplinary solutions. Additionally, a keynote speaker was secured, Christine Simiriglia, the founder and CEO of Pathways to Housing PA in Philadelphia. Since 2008, this organization has served and continues to serve approximately 550 chronically homeless people. Simiriglia’s organization is based in the host city for the 2022 NRHC conference, which was the organization’s first in-person conference since 2019; NRHC planned and implemented a service learning opportunity for conference attendees with Pathways to Housing to address the “impossible” problem of homelessness in the United States. These two marquee events, alongside what would be a few hundred student presentations, were the starting point for NRHC’s first virtual conference.

The two regional conferences, SRHC and NRHC, enjoyed a special collaboration. In order to facilitate the crossing of divides, the organizing committees worked together to identify crossover opportunities. The two conferences organized the collaboration and titled it “Asking Questions, Crossing Divides, Finding Solutions,” a nod to the themes of both conferences. NRHC was invited to SRHC’s Trivia Night and Keynote Roundtable Discussion. SRHC was invited to NRHC’s Playfair event and Author Talk. Feedback was overwhelmingly

positive from those who attended these events, and both NRHC and SRHC hope to continue crossover collaborations for the foreseeable future through virtual platforms and perhaps in-person ones.

Each organizing committee sensed that these virtual conferences would entail both additional planning and a great deal of uncertainty. And yet, we dedicated ourselves to the task of creating the best virtual conference experiences we could, hoping and trusting that we would get significant interest and response and that no major tech glitches would derail us. Finally, we also realized that our students would still be enhancing their communication skills and gaining further confidence to propel them forward in their academic endeavors and professional lives. With hopes that our efforts would produce delightful results by offering energetic opportunities for engagement and by utilizing the fluidity of the online platforms to cross divides in form and content, all three conferences forged ahead. (See Table 1 for data on each event’s CFP timeline, submissions, acceptances and total event registrations.)

Table 1. KHR, SRHC & NRHC 2021 At-A-Glance

ORG	CFP	Submissions/ Acceptances*	Registrations
KHR	January	51	125
SRHC	January–February	180	273
NRHC	August–November	240	424

*Note: All three events accepted 100% of submissions vetted by deans and directors at member institutions.

CULTIVATING DELIGHT AT THE KENTUCKY HONORS ROUNDTABLE

KHR is an association of honors programs and colleges from across the commonwealth of Kentucky. KHR hosts conferences that provide honors scholars with an opportunity to present scholarly and creative work and build community and professional networks.

KHR also serves as a venue for Kentucky's honors directors, deans, administrators, and faculty to share ideas about best practices. The eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic meant the cancellation of the fall 2020 session, but KHR moved online for the following spring. In a typical year, KHR attracts anywhere from 40 to 90 student presenters, plus observing student attendees and a full host of honors-affiliated faculty and administrators. For the spring 2021 virtual conference, KHR began accepting applications in January and ultimately drew 125 registrants, including 51 students from 8 different Kentucky institutions who gave oral presentations, led poster tour discussions, or shared creative work. All proposals were vetted prior to acceptance, and all submissions were accepted.

The online shift brought challenges and unique opportunities, including the ability to feature writer Ross Gay as a keynote speaker. With an already scheduled virtual visit from Gay to the Lewis Honors College at the University of Kentucky coinciding with dates for the spring gathering of the Kentucky Honors Roundtable, we negotiated an extended invitation to all KHR participants to attend this event. Featuring his irresistible, unassuming charm, Gay's opening keynote sharing excerpts of *The Book of Delight*, his best-selling collection of essays, set the tone for the first-ever virtual session of the Kentucky Honors Roundtable. His talk provided an antidote to the spiritual fatigue of a pandemic year as well as a refreshing reprieve from the laser-focused achievement preoccupations many of our honors students hold. When asked what delights them, honors students are likely to respond by describing an upcoming internship or ongoing undergraduate research project and are often consumed by their academic and professional pursuits. While those projects may bring genuine pleasure, they are not the kinds of experiences that Gay describes in his book.

Gay teaches his readers that seeing all of the parts of the world around them is a valuable exercise, even the parts that seem inconsequential in the moment. By shifting our focus to seemingly mundane details of daily life and celebrating the minor joys they bring, Gay models a practice of reflection and offers a sense of perspective that can promote creative adaptation and even a kind of delight in the face of adversity and struggle. Even his essays that discuss serious hardships and injustices radiate hope and resilience. For example, Gay

shared with our audience the precarious experience of transporting a delicate tomato plant through an airport, and with his engaging reading of his work, he took us on the journey with him, which he presented as a shared delight among his fellow travelers who exhibited surprise in discovering what he carried and who then rooted for the plant's safe passage. This narrative reminded his listeners that others root for them too, that we are to root for each other, and that the process of rooting for others, like the process of establishing roots, builds reciprocal sustaining connections. KHR's virtual format sustained the fruitful connections of Kentucky's honors community during the pandemic season, which was rife with cancellations and isolation.

Engaging with Gay's work challenged honors students to take a journey of their own as they inventory their own lives and see these little pieces of triumph, curiosity, empathy, humor, collective humanity, community, and belonging not in spite of, but in the midst of difficulty. Janet Ledesma defines resilience as "the ability to bounce back from adversity, frustration and misfortune," and like Gay's tomato plant, we want our students to not only survive the journey but grow and thrive, to bounce back from life's bumps and storms (1). We know from our own work with the honors students in our programs and the research of other scholars that honors students suffer from high rates of stress, anxiety, perfectionism, and other mental health concerns that have been compounded by the conditions of a global pandemic (Owens and Giazzoni 39; Rice et al.). Consequently, KHR organizers wanted to create a deliberately delightful incarnation of KHR this year that would not be simply another stressor but a meaningful and uplifting experience for our students.

KHR President Jon Blandford enlisted students' help in planning the conference. Despite the constraints of protective pandemic regulations and Zoom fatigue, students from various Kentucky honors programs and colleges took up this invitation and collaborated with their peers from other campuses to create new ways to implement KHR traditions, such as the community-building social activity traditionally held the evening prior to the conference presentations. Past conferences featured events such as trivia contests and murder mysteries that allowed students from different institutions to get to know each other and connect before the next day's conference sessions. As an online alternative, students on the planning committee opted

for a TikTok Challenge (a video contest) and virtual escape rooms. These activities furthered relationships in their home honors programs and across institutions. The TikTok Challenge resulted in delightfully collaborative, innovative, and humorous clips that educated students, faculty, and staff about their KHR companions from other honors programs and colleges. The contest also generated enthusiasm for participation in the Kentucky Honors Roundtable among the honors student populations at each institution.

Western Kentucky University student Langley Williams created elaborate virtual escape rooms that allowed for simultaneous collaboration among participants who could view both the room and each other to click around a virtual room, analyze clues, solve puzzles, and compete with other groups to “escape” in the shortest period of time. The KHR hosts created breakout room rosters that deliberately mingled participants from multiple institutions into the virtual escape rooms to foster cross-institutional honors social networking and a sense of community among the members of KHR.

The escape rooms and the Tik Tok contest were not only great fun, they also modeled key tenets of honors pedagogy. By involving students in the conference development process and by kicking off the conference with participatory and collaborative activities, we encouraged the student participants of KHR to be active and agentic in their learning. We want honors students to see education as an adventure and not merely a series of course requirements they satisfy with high marks. Starting with pleasure, collaboration, fun, and reflection upon delight in an academic setting, whether it is a classroom or an honors conference, offers an instance of intellectual engagement that disrupts what many honors students have seen modeled, welcomed, or praised. Similarly, Gay’s self-presentation exhibits a lightheartedness, grace, and humility at odds with certain conventions of the serious academics that bifurcate brains from bodies and joy from education. “If the ultimate goal in contemporary honors programs and colleges,” Samuel Schuman reminds us in *If Honors Students Were People: Holistic Honors Education*, “is to help students learn to be, in every way, the best people they are capable of being, remembering that they are not disembodied intellects is necessary” (24). After hearing Gay’s work, contemplating his essays of delight, and listening to him discuss his process and his experiences, one gleans a message inherently holistic

and wholesome, a message that urges students to contemplate deeply the virtues of taking notice, slowing down, savoring social engagement, and creating and cultivating curiosity.

Other delights of a virtual conference resulted from its increased accessibility. The virtual conference format allowed the smaller institutions in KHR to overcome the financial and geographic burdens of conference attendance. Although students are never charged registration fees, more students were able to attend the virtual conference since hotel and transportation expenses were not required. Students also welcomed the variety of formats in which they could present material. The first student presentation was a musical performance, and the performer recorded and shared her music online after the session. Some students shared their research with viewers in digital versions of posters or oral presentations with slides and then responded to questions from those in their virtual rooms. Many students, particularly those new to conference presentations, remarked that presenting virtually reduced their anxieties. Hosting the 2021 KHR virtually also broadened the audience for student work significantly. Parents, other family members, staff, faculty, and friends could support participating students by watching their presentations from any location with sufficient internet access. “The virtual format this year,” Lewis Honors College student Tejaswini Sudakhar affirms, “was actually more convenient in that it allowed my friends to also watch my presentation, which they wouldn’t have been able to do in person. It also made it more accessible for more people to leave comments and ask questions, and it was validating to know that the other participants . . . were genuinely engaged with my presentation enough to be inquisitive about it!” Hosting online also allowed us to promote the conference and share links to sessions via social media. This may have had the effect of increasing student, faculty, and staff interest in participating in future gatherings. What is most delightful about this consortium is the collaboration and connections it offers. By offering a virtual conference, we extended the reach of this roundtable further than ever before.

CROSSING DIVIDES WITH SRHC

Crossing divides resonated with the organizers of SRHC and NRHC, but for different reasons. The history of enslavement and segregation

makes the Deep South an essential site to address the roots, ongoing processes, and persistent structures of racism in the United States. The SRHC has committed to taking a leadership role with our institutions to address and act on this particular American divide in its ongoing work. The divides between North and South persist in other ways, particularly through regional assumptions. Regional bias is in many ways the only remaining acceptable bias in this country: one is allowed to express the expectation, and to believe, that people in the Northeast are rude, Southerners are uneducated, and Northwesterners eat only granola bars. SRHC President Kathy Cooke served on the Board of the NRHC from 2011 to 2013 and was eager to reach out to old and new friends in the region. While still working in Connecticut, Cooke met a woman from Virginia with whom she discussed the challenges of being female administrators in higher education. But the woman from Virginia shared another challenge: her Southern accent. Even when she was in graduate school at an Ivy League institution, she found that students and faculty assumed, based on her twang, that she was less intellectually capable. This prejudice motivated Cooke's decision to move to Alabama, to challenge these assumptions through direct experience. The SRHC, NRHC, and KHR all have board members with a similar range of interpersonal experiences. We also are colleagues who have lived in and worked at a wide variety of institutions from all across the country, including Illinois, California, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Georgia, Kentucky, and Alabama, and at institutions ranging from small and midsize private universities and colleges to large and midsize regional public universities. We agreed that it would be useful to challenge regional divides while also focusing on racial divides past and present.

Crossing divides is a useful goal, but what does it mean in practice, and in particular at a virtual conference? Our plan was to design opportunities to meet others with different backgrounds, viewpoints, and regional points of origin through careful attention to the structures of the conference that put people and ideas in conversation with one another: the virtual space, the use of texts and presentations, and the catalysts for dialogue. Through juxtapositions and conversations among people with seemingly very different perspectives, we learn more while extending and developing our intellectual capacities. In practice, the crossover conference mediated opportunities to create

proximity through small groups and one-on-one opportunities. We did this primarily through a team-based “City as Quest” experience,² through crossover decompression chambers created by NRHC, and through unique “hosted conversation” sessions created by SRHC.

We also crossed divides through larger keynote events. On Tuesday, 6 April, from 7:00–8:00 p.m., SRHC crossed a geographic divide by joining the NRHC for the virtual talk they organized on “Questioning the Past” by the journalist Cody McDevitt, author of *Banished from Johnstown: Racist Backlash in Pennsylvania*. While this talk invited students from both conferences to reflect on the history of racism and injustice against people of color in our country and the enduring legacies of that history, it was important for us also to foreground the work that anti-racist activists, artists, advocates, and legislators are doing in the present. To that end, the SRHC invited NRHC participants to its Saturday keynote roundtable featuring Kentucky State Representative Attica Scott, poet and author Hannah Drake, Keturah Herron from the ACLU of Kentucky, and Bellarmine University student Kelzé Riley. These four Black women activists spoke powerfully about their experience doing the work of anti-racist advocacy and justice; in particular, they discussed their leadership roles during the protests that followed the police killing of Breonna Taylor. This conversation and their courageous example created an ideal crossover opportunity for students, faculty, and staff from states throughout the Southern Region, as well as honors community members from the Northern Region, to contemplate social change in our own communities. It also allowed us to center the voices and perspectives of Black women in particular, who for too long have been subject to the toxic combination of racism and sexism that scholar Moya Bailey has dubbed “misogynoir.”

SRHC opened submissions from January 15 to February 15 and received approximately 180 submissions from students and faculty at over 30 institutions. All submissions were vetted and then organized according to theme and disciplinary interconnections into oral presentations, poster tour sessions, creative works, faculty panels, and hosted conversations on a range of proposed topics of urgency as perceived by the SRHC membership. Including all presenters and some observers, 273 people registered for the SRHC virtual conference, and over a dozen faculty members generously volunteered to perform Zoom hosting and share session moderating duties.

POSING AND ANSWERING INFREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AT NRHC

Before imagining such a fruitful partnership with SRHC, NRHC dove deeply into planning its conference. The conference theme (“Infrequently Asked Questions: Finding Solutions to Impossible Problems”) was created by the NRHC President-Elect, Chris Brittain (Rutgers University—Camden). To say the least, the entire Executive Board of NRHC had many questions about how to successfully execute a virtual conference. The decision to be fully virtual was a scary but necessary one given the uncertainty of the pandemic. After years of planning successful in-person events, we wondered if we could do justice to a virtual event. We were also worried about virtual fatigue since our conference would not be held until April 2021, a year after everyone entered the virtual environment. Nevertheless, the planning continued.

The first decision was to set a timeline for the entire virtual conference. The call for proposals opened in late August 2020 with a deadline in late November 2020. Proposers could opt into pre-recorded presentations (poster projects for students and idea exchanges for faculty/staff) or live synchronous presentations (paper panel presentations, roundtable discussions, or art presentations—all for students). The 240 proposals received by the deadline underwent a review process; all proposals were accepted although some were accepted on the condition of transitioning to a pre-recorded presentation. All live presentations were slated to take place across April 10 and 11; however, a full program of conference events would span from March 30 to April 16. Throughout the fall, other conference features were developed: some would be synchronous; others would be asynchronous. One of the asynchronous features of the conference, also planned by Chris Brittain, was City as Quest. A play on the very well-known City as Text™ feature of many NCHC and regional honors conferences, City as Quest was designed to put students in teams to engage in virtual explorations. This conference feature was not limited to the borders of a single city but took students around the world. The challenge contained ten different puzzles, each of which led explorers to a virtual space within the worldwide web and tasked them with finding the answer to a question rooted in the history and geography of an area. SRHC shared this asynchronous activity with the conference participants, as did the Mid-East Honors

Association (MEHA). Ten teams with a full roster participated in the activity, and one team of four students from Frederick Community College solved all ten puzzles correctly. NRHC believes that launching subsequent versions of City as Quest may be an opportunity to continue to engage students in the region throughout the year instead of just at the annual conference.

The next decision was to set a conference registration rate. The rate was set at \$75 per registrant, and we wondered if we would entice enough registrants for the conference, given that honors budgets were even more diminished throughout the pandemic. After we accepted 240 proposals in mid-December 2020, we opened our registration system in January. We were extremely and pleasantly surprised that 424 unique individuals registered for the conference. This number was just 140 fewer registrants than we drew to our 2019 in-person conference in Baltimore, Maryland.

We were able to communicate effectively with our registrants because we used a vendor, YesEvents, to assist with both our CFP and registration systems. YesEvents created a virtual landing page for our conference with links to each of the unique events in our conference program. We coordinated with YesEvents to send frequent emails during the conference period (March 30–April 16) to advertise the various events. YesEvents was also extremely helpful in setting up all the Zoom meeting sessions through NRHC's purchased Zoom licenses. The assistance of YesEvents was well worth the cost to help us plan and execute these virtual logistics smoothly. All registrants had a unique ID to their own portal to access events. (Outsiders would not be able to join the live Zoom sessions during the conference period.) This barrier was helpful because it mitigated any worries of unwelcome virtual visitors.

The conference itself went as beautifully as it could have gone. It kicked off on March 30 with a live webinar meeting where NRHC streamed a prerecorded welcome address from NRHC President Irina Ellison (Mercy College) and President-Elect Chris Brittain. Also during this first week of events, our Faculty Representatives AnnMarie DelliPizzi (Dominican College) and Zachary Aidala (Bloomfield College) hosted a Big Picture on Diversity in Honors while the Student Representative, Taylor Bennett (Gannon University), hosted a Student Decompression Chamber.

Part of NRHC's efforts included securing sponsors for our conference to offset costs. One of these vendors, Playfair, provided a free event for our attendees. This was one of the "crossover" events with SRHC and made virtual networking exciting and enjoyable. Outside of the partnership with Playfair, NRHC secured sponsorships with an additional 14 organizations. We worked with all of our sponsors to create a package that will extend their sponsorship into our 2022 event in Philadelphia.

The main week of conference events also included dedicated events for faculty and students. For faculty/staff, we hosted a Beginning in Honors Workshop. Richard Badenhausen (Westminster University) and Lowell "Chris" Matthews (Southern New Hampshire University) moderated this event. Also for professionals, the Consultants' Corner was presented by Patrick Fazioli (Mercy College) and Linda Kobylarz (Post University); the topics here were on discussing best practices in honors capstone courses and honors budgeting.

Students were invited to a virtual talent showcase; however, the event was canceled because the number of contestants was low. Some students participated in SRHC's Trivia Night, with one of the NRHC participants racking up major points and ultimately finishing first. The biggest days for students at #NRHC2021 were April 10 and 11 when live presentations took place. The conference was divided into 5 sessions. Each session had panel presentations and roundtable discussions (between 8-10 Zoom rooms running per session). Meanwhile, dozens of pre-recorded presentations were already available to attendees through NRHC's Virtual Conference Lobby on its website. All student presentations (both asynchronous and synchronous) are now cataloged and archived on the NRHC website (nrhchonors.com/presentation-lobby). Feedback on the presentation days was very positive. Also, all presenters were sent a digital presentation certificate via email to acknowledge their contribution to #NRHC2021.

The conference wrapped up with a Virtual Awards Ceremony where we honored both students and faculty in our region for their contributions to honors. A few final events followed, including the NRHC Expo and Graduate Fair, an event with over 14 organizations and academic institutions, in which students moved between breakout rooms to meet with vendors. Finally, NRHC hosted its Student Caucus and Business Meeting.

Overall, NRHC was extremely pleased with the conference. The levels of engagement during live events were high, and the number of technical issues were minimal. Our post conference survey received 51 responses, with 82.4% student participation; 92.2% of respondents rated their experience as either a “4” or “5.” One respondent said, “After the conference being canceled last year, I finally had the opportunity to present the research that I’ve worked so hard on. Plus there were great speakers. . . . It was engaging and fun!” With such feedback, NRHC will consider incorporating virtual features in the future; the next “impossible” question is how to effectively launch a hybrid conference model. Of course, NRHC learned an important lesson: asking “impossible” questions leads to finding extraordinary, innovative, and feasible solutions.

POST-PANDEMIC REFLECTIONS

As we return to something approaching normalcy on our campuses, we are not simply reverting to business as usual prior to the pandemic. On the contrary, some aspects of virtual learning, meetings, and conferences are and should be here-to-stay enhancements that offer added value as well as providing broader forms of access and more inclusive and effective modes of communication. Specifically, the experience of planning and running these virtual conferences provided the opportunity to reflect on how best to integrate positive elements of virtual learning, meetings, and conferencing into honors education. Some questions to consider include: What elements add the greatest value to our students’ experience and development? What aspects of virtual conferencing add creativity and delight to honors education? How can we structure virtual interactions and presentations to help students best develop their communication skills? How can we continue to capitalize on the power of virtual conversation to cross divides and foster mutual understanding and respect? Can and should honors education at all levels (institutional, state, regional, and national) be using virtual conferencing to foster a greater sense of community and for networking?

With budgets at many of our institutions already strapped before the pandemic, and with ongoing concerns about returning to liquidity, we all recognize that travel, registration, and accommodation costs can be a serious barrier to fuller participation at our regional and national

conferences. Our experience this past year has demonstrated that even with the return of conference travel and in-person gatherings, virtual presentation opportunities and encounters may continue to be sought by many institutions that cannot necessarily send large numbers of students at high expense to multiple events each year. The inclusion of virtual elements as part of a hybrid conference design might therefore be a good idea for regionals like SRHC and NRHC, as well as state honors organizations such as KHR, to consider. Obviously, a balance must be struck since traditional conference viability itself depends on attracting a critical mass of participants, and something is naturally special and indispensably collegial about socializing in person in professional settings. We should be wary of losing aspects of the essential value of conferences if we open them up too much to a virtual experience. It is clear, however, that a niche for virtual conferences exists and that honors organizations need to clarify what that might look like moving forward. For instance, one option would be to stream keynote presentations and general sessions for remote viewing and to designate sessions as 100% virtual for posters, oral presentations, and recorded creative works. The hope would be that the virtual aspects alongside a basically full slate of traditional in-person events would appeal to students at institutions with financial resources as well as students who are interested in participating but attend institutions with financial limitations. This combination would obviously be something of a gamble, and it is relevant to note that as we moved out of full pandemic mode in the 2021–2022 academic year, NCHC chose not to go the route of hybrid conference design, presumably because the organization needed to prioritize attracting a certain minimum number of participants to travel the long distance to Orlando, Florida, in order to make the conference happen at all. But regional organizations, which can perhaps count on a reasonable in-person participant pool given the lesser distances and costs involved, might be better positioned to undertake a hybrid experiment in future years. This arrangement could produce value added in terms of increasing the number of students and institutions that can participate overall, and, importantly, it would serve the purpose of furthering student development in communication, networking, and technology skills.

Independent of the question of hybrid conference designs and their added educational and professional value, clearly aspects of virtual

technology can add fun and delight to the conference experience. In doing so, they can also help us to develop a sense of shared culture and shared experience. The potential to enhance conferences with online elements is limited only by imagination. To keep things as fresh and innovative as possible, student leaders ought to be consulted to help generate ideas for activities like school video promo competitions along the lines of the KHR TikTok challenge, to weigh in about what platforms to use, to establish a successful and engaging set of conference social pages (something more than announcing a Twitter hashtag), to upload short videos and images of their experiences, or to coordinate meetups in host cities.

Technology can and should be used intentionally and ever more effectively to cross divides of a social, political, economic, and cultural nature. We have seen quite vividly in the past few years how effectively technology can produce a global response to the need, as in the cases of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, for true justice and equality. Educators must follow through in terms of even deeper analysis and discussion of widespread issues of similar concern, such as indigenous affairs, resource extraction and the destruction of the environment, residential schools, the truth and reconciliation movement, environmental racism, and climate change inequality. Honors organizations must continue to take a leadership role in addressing issues concerning our local communities, our regions, our nation, and the globe in order to encourage and enable our students to become leaders in their own right in the future.

Finally, technology and virtual encounters offer opportunities to create a greater sense of community across the spectrum of honors. The pandemic, which forced us entirely into the virtual mode of interaction, also forced us to focus on communication more generally. Even in that extended moment of physical distancing, we were reminded of what we have in common, of our shared interests and experiences as an honors community. The NCHC, which has traditionally taken the leading role, might be called upon to form a committee to explore the ways in which a national conversation and national community can be further developed with the implementation of some regular virtual activities, whether as part of a hybrid conference or by other means. The authors of this chapter are grateful for the lessons we learned organizing KHR, SRHC, and NRHC, and we encourage anyone who wants to

collaborate to reach out to any of us. If we can increase collaboration and improve communication, we will no doubt discover new sources of delight, cross other divides, and further pose and perhaps even answer important yet infrequently asked questions.

ENDNOTES

¹KHR decided that summer to forego its usual fall meeting in order to focus on the spring. Leading up to the cancellation of its 2020 conference, NRHC was able to negotiate a rescheduling of its conference in Albany in April 2021. NRHC ensured that participants would be given a penalty-free cancellation, pending the situation with the pandemic, up to 1 January 2021. Because many member institutions reported virtual plans for the fall semester and uncertainty about their ability to travel in the spring, NRHC decided in the summer of 2020 to move its conference fully online to be able to plan the richest virtual conference experience possible and communicate this information to members as soon as possible. In the past, NRHC's peak attendance at an in-person event reached 602 attendees in 2015, with most conferences averaging between 480–550 attendees. NRHC did not know if a virtual conference would attract the same interest. SRHC, which at its peak has welcomed 720 registrants to its annual conference, took longer to announce its decision to shift online, in part because of the need to renegotiate contracts it signed with hotels for the conferences that would have been held in Birmingham and Charlotte the next two years. The initial rescheduling of the Birmingham conference to 2021 was necessary to avoid losing money on the 2020 cancellation.

²“City as Quest” was inspired by NCHC's City as Text™ experiential learning program. For a discussion of virtual City as Text experiences, see the chapter by Quay, Ellison, Heaphy, Ketcham, Lefton, and Martino in this collection.

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