CHAPTER TWELVE

Building and Fostering Honors Communities: Lessons from Social Distancing

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INTRODUCTION

While scholars of online education have been developing ways to foster a sense of belonging in online spaces for years, many of us in honors were thrown into the deep end for the first time in March 2020. As a result, we are now able to see the potential of online practices in a way we could not previously. This chapter tells the story of how we came to see the value of virtual community made possible by digital technology as an invaluable complement to the in-person

work of a twenty-first-century honors program. Before the Work from Home (WFH) era, the Johnson County Community College Honors Program had an online presence that was limited to a few social media platforms. Similarly, at Hillsborough Community College, the honors program's online presence was limited to social media. No classes had ever been offered online in either program, and advising appointments via Skype or Zoom were rare—mainly performed with international students prior to their arrival in the U.S. For both of our programs, social distancing was a learning experience that enhanced our efforts to foster an honors community on our respective campuses.

As the pandemic unfolded, we found ourselves prioritizing our online presence as the only tool for creating community among honors students. For many students and staff, the internet turned into a life-line, one of the few places where a semblance of normalcy could still be found. As we strove to foster an honors community online, we realized that we now had to work for what we had always taken for granted. We found ourselves becoming even more intentional about our outreach to students, about our programming content, and about our social media use, and we discovered that regardless of students' intersected identities, age, marital status, or educational goals, their success was very much contingent on their feelings of belonging to a robust community of learners—even if that community was mostly online.

Our primary concern was for our students' well-being. Many of them had lost jobs or were suddenly compelled to take on jobs to support their struggling families; some found themselves in unwelcoming, even hostile living environments; all were struggling to preserve both their physical and mental health. With the help of our faculty and our students, we gradually pulled together regular online outreach, digital events, virtual programming, and several supportive online tools. Our desire was that honors become a "one-stop shop," fulfilling the needs of our students, including but not limited to help with enrollment, assistance filing for unemployment, resources for accessing other forms of financial support, help with academic course completion, and personal counseling services.

Now, in the aftermath of two long years of social distancing that forced us away from our respective campuses, we felt compelled to reflect on our experience. In many ways, the pandemic made visible what had previously gone unseen or was previously taken for granted.

It forced us to recognize the value of online learning as a pedagogical practice in its own right—one that, some would argue, is better suited to certain content than in-person learning. It made our students' inequality come into focus, and it helped us to see how important community and sociality are to learning. Students and faculty in honors have come to realize that an inclusive community, whether online or in person, supports and drives much of their success. Connections made with like-minded peers and colleagues, whether online or in person, provide a sense of belonging to all. The pandemic sharpened our awareness that we have a responsibility to preserve at least some, if not all, of the COVID-inspired emergency practices that led our students to success during this challenging time. A brief overview of literature on community building in higher education affirms the importance of intentionality when building and fostering community in our honors programs, not simply taking for granted this central pillar of honors education. While many researchers focus on the benefits of creating a strong classroom community (McCabe; Szumowski; Jordan), a number focus on the value of the honors community at large, building on the work of Samuel Schuman. Our chapter straddles these two interconnected spaces to affirm the centrality of sociality and belonging in honors.

SOCIALITY AND BELONGING

Programming both inside and outside the classroom is integral to building a sense of community in an honors program. To do so, honors administrators have long drawn from cutting-edge scholarship in higher education and collaborated with directors of centers of teaching and learning on their respective campuses. As such, a longitudinal study performed by Alexander W. Astin illustrates the value of student engagement in extracurricular communities for retention and completion. Community is the safety net allowing students to try new things and move beyond what is comfortable. Conversely, George D. Kuh tells us that community is a byproduct of engaged learning practices (15).

In *How Humans Learn*, Joshua R. Eyler situates the findings of such specialists as Astin and Kuh on student involvement and engaged learning in the larger backdrop of what remains constant in the learning process across ages, cultures, and other differences. Eyler

argues: "The brain may mature and develop, but the ways in which we learn remain largely the same" (*How* 9). He organizes his synthesis of years of research in fields spanning biology, anthropology, and higher education, to name only a few, under five categories describing how human beings learn: curiosity, sociality, emotion, authenticity, and failure. While curiosity and failure may not require immediate contact with other human beings, the three central pillars of how humans learn—sociality, emotion, and authenticity—are fundamentally social. If learning is so fundamentally social, how do we create learning environments that reproduce the necessary safety, comfort, and sense of belonging in an online context?

A college experience is commonly pictured as an array of social interactions between professors and students, groups of students, and students with other stakeholders, such as alumni or community organizations providing internships or service learning opportunities. Prior to COVID, a sense of belonging in honors was created through events and spaces such as orientations, honors study lounges, honors student organizations, leadership opportunities, service in the community, socials, and other programming that brings students, faculty, and staff together. Faith Gablenick's "Leading and Learning in Community" emphasizes the centrality of community in honors education. She elaborates on what she calls the transformative campus and how transformation is linked to communities of leadership and communities of learning. "When we lead and learn in community," Gablenick writes, "we discover our roles over time; we purposefully commit to shared values and goals; and we acknowledge a diversity of viewpoints, perspectives and backgrounds" (51). In honors, then, sociality is integral to learning because it deepens our ability to understand the material under scrutiny.

General characteristics of an honors community include similarities in teaching and learning goals, social norms and expectations, a commitment to civic engagement, even a sense of place and togetherness. As Stan van Ginkel et al. observe: "Honors communities fulfill three main functions: (1) they stimulate learning and development; (2) they enhance social and emotional wellbeing; and (3) they stimulate the organization of activities at the university …" (205). The connections made through academic, social, and civic events allow the community to become the foundation for risk taking, creative thinking, problem solving, and leadership development.

Whether explicitly stated or not, sociality is central to much of the growth and learning that students do in college. That online experiences are no exception has only become increasingly obvious since March of 2020. Even proponents of in-person teaching like Eyler, who closed his chapter on sociality stating, "being in the same place matters a great deal for educational success as it allows for the full expression of our social nature as human beings" (*How* 107), now recognize the value of online education. In the online public keynote address, sponsored by Plymouth State University's Open Learning and Teaching Collaborative, which Eyler gave on 30 April 2021, he urged his audience to learn from the virtual learning space of the WFH to improve student success moving forward by incorporating remote activities where they make sense and might even be more suitable than in-person activities ("On Grief"). We want to focus on two fundamental spaces where community building takes place in higher education and in honors most particularly and where a sense of belonging makes all the difference in students' retention and completion: the classroom and extracurricular programming.

THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Scholars of education from Maria Montessori or L. S. (Lev) Vygotsky to directors of teaching and learning offices affirm the importance of sociality in all learning, which, as Eyler observes, "happens in a social context because we are learning with and from one another. This is as true in college as it is in any other educational environment" (*How* 66). Humans learn in groups; this phenomenon is a byproduct of our evolution as much as it is fundamentally practical, and it has led to a number of pedagogies that place human contact and the collaboration of students at the center of learning. Engineering student contact in the classroom can happen in many ways. Honors students naturally engage before class starts because they know one another and share other classes together. They contribute to class discussion because they are more likely to have read the assigned material. Students appreciate engaging assignments that might also include field trips and other organized projects/programs that are key components to transformational learning and encourage interdependence.

Vygotsky, for instance, affirmed the need for students to work together to reach their full potential. While some learning happens individually, students will only reach their full potential with either the help of a teacher or in collaboration with peers. Vygotsky calls "the distance between the actual development level as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" the zone of proximal development (86). For such group learning to happen successfully, students need to feel that they belong to take risks, be vulnerable, and engage in collaborative and cooperative learning. A direct application of Vygotsky's theory developed in his book *Mind in Society* was integrated in an honors classroom at the University of Southern Maine to great effect. As described by Kaitlin A. Briggs, the honors thesis workshop is the opportunity for students to read Vygotsky and apply his teachings directly: "Vygotsky's chapter serves both as an example of a literature review and as a catalyst for undertaking the processes of intertextual scaffolding, but the direct application of his theory to students participating in a research community may be the most compelling reason to use it as a common reading in an honors thesis workshop" (65). Briggs concludes that the creation of a community in the honors thesis workshop led to improved work from all students in the class, thereby affirming Vygotsky's teaching.

Because in-person instruction is still the default, online learning environments are often shaped by the fundamentals of in-person instruction, including community and belonging. Specialists of online education such as Kevin Kelly or Omid Fotuli are quick to emphasize the importance of community when asked about student success. While thoughtful pedagogical approaches are essential to our students' learning in online classes, their success hinges on their sense of belonging, regardless of delivery method. Furthermore, such online pedagogical efforts should align with investments that ensure that all our students feel included, regardless of their diverse intersected identities. Keonya C. Booker's research illustrates just that: the culture of the classroom emphasizes a sense of belonging. It is incumbent upon faculty members to create a sense of community in their classroom by being approachable, accessible, and authentic. In-person on-campus classrooms more readily provide for these key

components to community. The expectations for those key components to the online classroom community remain the same; however, the characteristics of delivery can make this more complicated and require intentional investment.

In *Advancing Online Teaching*, Kevin Kelly and Todd Zakrajsek incorporate lessons learned from in-person teaching experiences with a particular focus on the importance of the sense of belonging, especially when one is designing equitable and inclusive online learning environments. "Although technological factors, students' study habits, and personal behaviors all affect students' ability to complete an online course," argue Kelly and Zakrajsek, "social and psychological factors, such as community and belonging, also play an important role in online student persistence" (113). Students' physical and emotional needs must be taken care of before they can focus on learning; therefore, Kelly and Zakrajsek encourage instructors to list resources in their syllabi or online learning management platform to help address students' need for food, shelter, mental-health support, or writing support. Beyond students' basic needs, they suggest ways to engage students in discussion in online courses to affirm their sense of belonging to a specific community of learners. These and more suggestions can be found at the end of this article.

Alternatively, faculty who have been long-term proponents of engaged learning practices, such as Professor Eric Mazur from Harvard University, have realized that their pedagogy could do more than simply adapt to the new normal. Mazur embraced the transition to online learning and reinvented his class in ways that he is going to permanently adopt. In an interview with the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Mazur says, "When you teach online, every single student is sitting in the front row" (McMurtrie, 2021). Not only did the change to online learning enable him to interact with more students in his class, but he argues, staples of his class, like collaborative assignments, are in fact better suited for an online environment. The changes that Mazur implemented during the pandemic are here to stay because of the measured increase in student success in this newly created online format. Mazur's experience is a model to emulate: he embraced Sean Michael Morris's command to "teach through the screen, not to the screen" and to find ways to better serve our students using all the tools at our disposal, electronic and otherwise.

As we leave our homes to return to campus, adjusting to the demands of global pandemics that may ebb and flow, lessons learned from the Work from Home era will bring forth new ways to educate and serve our students. Although we will not, nor can we, return to what our former normal was, we should build on lessons learned and keep on learning. We must recognize that what makes students and faculty feel a part of the honors community is regular communication to "humanize the learning experience" and to initiate and encourage personal contact (McDougall 250), whether online or in person, and then keep doing it, intentionally.

EXTRACURRICULAR PROGRAMMING

Fostering sociality outside of the classroom has always been primarily done in person: whether through social gatherings or more academic ones, the co-curricular programming component of honors and other programs is designed to increase student engagement and foster students' sense of belonging at their home institution. In the same way that the pandemic helped the world see social inequalities and systemic inequities for what they truly are, WFH helped us see that as inclusive in design as our programming may have been, we never captured all our students because some of them could seldom, if ever, attend, either because of their parental responsibilities, their employment schedule, or simply because of physical access. The physical location of such programs, for example, can sometimes be inaccessible to students with limited mobility or access to transportation. WFH, therefore, made us more aware of our students' varying needs and created opportunities to invite speakers who would otherwise be too costly to bring to campus in person. These kinds of activities are not going away: we have learned new ways to make the world smaller and more inclusive.

Many students arrive at the post-secondary level of their education with the assumption that academics must be the most important focus for success. Such an assumption is most often held by students whose parents may not have completed a college degree or students who are forced to work long hours in order to afford attending college. What these students often ignore and miss out on are the benefits of engagement outside the classroom. Faculty and administrators serving in honors have a responsibility to make honor spaces more inclusive

and to ensure that students' engagement, which results in community building, is strong. Through the various means to be engaged in learning, students discover the reasons to invest in the honors community. Time and again, students share their awareness, especially in terms of the community, of deriving from honors only as much as they invest. Nancy A. Stanlick underscores this point: "Even the self-interested individualist recognizes that becoming a member of a community requires respecting the interests of the community lest the benefits gained by the individual from the community cease to be received" (78). Honors students might be like-minded in many ways, but they are as diverse a population as any found in higher education. Investment in this heterogeneous group produces valuable results.

The literature on student extracurricular programming in the online world is relatively sparse; however, the field of engaged learning practices has invested in online tools for some time and with promising results. In the field of international education, the SUNY-based Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) has encouraged the connection of U.S. classrooms with classrooms around the world in a few different fields. Ian McIntosh contributes a great illustration of such a project in this volume. Not only does such a pedagogy deepen the students' understanding of the material, but it enhances their learning in the process of connecting them to peers abroad to create a bicultural learning community. Peer collaborative project assignments across borders and group discussion emphasize exchanging ideas and understanding for a mutually beneficial learning experience, one promoting international cooperation even during a pandemic. In the field of service learning as well, an increasing number of reflections and resources are fully online, thereby creating flexibility and allowing more students to participate.

The imperative for honors programs, whether they are providing co-curricular programming or academic programming, online or in person, is to create a sense of community. When students feel a part of a group, they are more engaged in lectures and discussions, just as if they were in the classroom (McDougall). We all want to be a part of things, and in the classroom this feeling is especially important. With dynamic programming outside the classroom, community is built on an even stronger foundation. Identifying the diverse needs and interests of students is essential to providing the programming necessary to

build community. Our students in honors have a wide range of abilities and knowledge. They write, paint, play sports, sculpt, sing, play instruments, hike, camp, and explore. During COVID, those interests and abilities did not change, but how we addressed them did.

An honors community is ever evolving, with membership ebbing and flowing, especially at a two-year college. As new members replace old ones, the key is that those entering the community feel welcome, become active, and fully participate in the program. This transition can be accomplished through mandatory orientations, specific assignments for individual students or small groups, social events, workshops, peer ambassadors, and student organizations. The requirement, for example, to complete an honors leadership course during the first term can go a long way in supporting engagement and development within the community both in honors and at the institution.

Stanlick points to the necessity of effective programming in honors: "Complete membership in a community requires … not only that a member be present within the community but that the individual performs actions that are consistent with membership in it" (77). Faculty and students should be brought together outside the classroom in unexpected ways. Classes in tai chi, film nights with faculty-led discussions, colloquia, common reads, field trips, and invited speakers are some examples. As van Ginkel et al. observe, "The interweaving of social and professional activities helps create a seamless learning environment where students' intellectual, social, and personal lives can come together" (201). Maureen Kelleher aptly explains: "Such events humanize both groups and help build informal networks that are important resources for students at critical junctures" (32). Astin elaborates, "Frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic" (525).

Creating community and fostering a sense of belonging in all honors students happen online and in person through varied curricular and co-curricular experiences. But one thing sustains community above all else, and that is celebrating it. Regardless of influences within or beyond our control, it is imperative that community be celebrated through whatever events identify and highlight the positive role community has on all our lives. Those important celebrations include medallion and commencement ceremonies, banquets, and awards.

Ceremonies should be filled with shared memories and storytelling not only for those we celebrate but for the friends and loved ones who want to feel they, too, have been a part of the story.

POST OR LONG COVID: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

WFH heightened our awareness of our students' realities, such as their basic needs and their mental health, and increased our empathy, forcing us to be more creative to ensure that students were cared for. During the pandemic, our work habits changed, our understanding of what life can and should be changed, and our students' expectations for a fulfilling college education changed as well. This new world calls for honors administrators and faculty to draw from the many lessons learned during WFH to create more inclusive spaces, programs, and classes. And this volume is rife with creative answers to the dire time we faced while working from home. Between TikTok challenges, virtual escape rooms, scavenger hunts, and video channels, many chapters in this book richly illustrate how innovative honors operations are always developing new ways to support students despite the oddest of circumstances.

Our two programs engage in this effort by integrating lessons learned from WFH in our programs' practices. What follows is a brief description of what we plan to carry forward to make our respective honors programs a better place to be and a better place to learn. Our main takeaway from this challenging period is that of all the honors pillars, the cultivation of our students' sense of belonging to a community is central and pervasive. We realized that the cultivation of the honors community is in everything we do: from the emails we send our students to the classes we teach and the programming we produce.

The list below outlines pandemic-inspired practices that will be retained at the Johnson County Community College Honors Program:

- Many honors courses will retain an online or hybrid option, especially sections of our required honors seminar (HON 100) and capstone course called the "Honors Forum" (HON 270). A hybrid synchronous summer section of HON 100 was added to the schedule in 2021 to accommodate students' needs. This four-week experimental course proved

promising and may lead the way to other short-term hybrid endeavors and perhaps even a fully online course. The synchronous component became key to preserving aspects of the honors classroom as we knew it and cultivating our new students' sense of belonging to the honors community.

- Remote programming has proven relatively successful: we learned that Zoom allows for games to be played (Pictionary, trivia, and most kinds of icebreakers); for healthy discussions to take place, including difficult conversations about racial inequities; and for keynote speeches to be delivered by authors, from both far and near, at a reduced cost. We also learned that remote programming enables students who would not otherwise attend do so remotely, thereby making our efforts more inclusive. Therefore, we will maintain some of our programming on Zoom or other online platforms to ensure that we serve all our students better.

- Remote advising/counseling allowed many more students to be supported without the hassle of coming to campus to get answers to their questions. It led to an increase in demand for advising appointments and an ease in developing rapport with students who otherwise may never have availed themselves of the opportunity to engage. With the ease of access afforded by online tools, we have expanded our outreach to students and maintained our availability online to supplement in-person meetings. Online availability and flexibility have increased students' demand for advising and, in turn, doubled our enrollment in honors courses.

- We increased our social media presence and will continue fostering this effort to communicate with our community in and out of the classroom and on and off campus. Hours when postings on social media elicit optimal responses do not fall within 8 AM to 5 PM business hours because these are the times when people are at work or school and not on social media. We will, therefore, regularly hire a team of honors ambassadors to maintain our social media presence at peak hours.

- Following faculty demand, we also plan to hold regular meetings of the honors faculty. These started in spring 2020 as a means of sharing remote teaching strategies and other tricks faculty developed to support students' learning during the pandemic. Such meetings gradually became more formal, with occasional assigned readings and topics responding to immediate needs and current events. Together, we discussed implicit bias and other issues related to our campus's effort to be more inclusive, diverse, and equitable. We also discussed mental health issues faced by our students and possible means to support them, including mindfulness practices to temper students' anxiety.

- We encouraged the leaders of our honors student organization to embrace their social function, and they did so with gusto, ensuring that for an hour every other week online fun and games would be provided to the honors community. Our student leaders will continue this practice, making sure that they use all the available technology to remain as inclusive as possible.

- We created a hybrid recognition ceremony for which we gathered statements from faculty about every one of our graduates and projected them as each student was recognized. We will maintain this practice to supplement the vision of students crossing the stage to shake hands and gather their honors medal at graduation. Such personalized recognition will also be shared with students as a keepsake.

The following list outlines pandemic-inspired practices that will be retained at Hillsborough Community College:

- While COVID forced the mandatory fall orientations to be online, we returned to in-person delivery of content promptly, keeping much of the content and timing of the orientation similar. COVID made the importance of contact with students self-evident, from interns making personal telephone calls to students to planning in-person campus tours and social gatherings for students. Regardless of the

modality, the personal touch proved to make a difference in students' lives and sense of belonging to the program.

- We will continue to provide programming in a hybrid model. Because we have students scattered throughout a very large county, student organization meetings, film nights, guest speakers, and college recruitment events will rotate on campuses and be simulcast to the other campuses, when appropriate.

- Travel is an important component to our community and one of our best marketing tools. We have to support conference attendance whenever possible. Because international travel comes with extra complications at times, we will continue with virtual reality international experiences in Humanities and other courses through the Study Abroad Association. Students have responded positively to that experience and, perhaps, will be more confident and excited about international travel after having virtually toured exotic places and applied it to their classroom experience right here at home.

- The option for students to meet with the staff remotely will continue. More and more students are visiting the honors office, but for some, meeting on the main campus can be a great inconvenience. Currently, we are giving all students the choice of remote or in-person meetings with staff. Students seem split on their preference of live or online.

- Recruitment will probably change the most post-COVID. We have found reaching out to high school students individually to be a far more productive means of recruitment than interacting with large groups. Additionally, reaching out through the U.S. Post Office to encourage applications has worked well. Instant decision days will continue in person on the various campuses as well as online and remotely through the high schools.

- We look forward to a live Medallion Ceremony at the end of the year. Throughout COVID we insisted on no recordings on all online programs to encourage attendance. Although

we had some requests to tape events, we found that those truly interested in attending did. When we celebrate the achievements of our students and the advances of our program, we look forward to doing that together, with family and friends present, as a community. We envision a full auditorium. Time will tell.

- By providing classes that were online live at HCC, students and faculty were better able to get to know one another and relate to each other than if the classes had been held asynchronously. Anecdotally, students are looking forward to the return to the campus classroom, but they were appreciative of the live experience throughout the 2020/2021 academic year. Providing synchronous online honors classes created attendance problems for students with family and work obligations, but overall, they were well received by students and faculty alike.

- Throughout our COVID-driven online experience, we held online panel discussions on social justice, virtual movie nights with faculty guidance, digital craft nights, Zoom-based faculty office hours and conversations, online book discussions, workshops for scholarships and transferring, and vision boarding. The honors program's required leadership/service learning course, a key component to the program, provided the county community with more than 3,500 service hours to more than two dozen organizations. All these activities proved that we could replicate many things we do live within an online environment that builds community, with perhaps even more inclusivity. We look forward to on-campus experiences, but we also know that students and faculty have come to expect even more access to online programming than ever before. Post-COVID-19, we will be ever cognizant of accessibility to our entire program throughout a large and heavily populated county.

CONCLUSION

Although none of us were prepared to live in social isolation, to teach online, or to reinvent our programming in March 2020, we did it, and we emerged stronger for it. We learned much about how we learn, what we need to be well and stay well, and what it means to succeed. We also realized that creating community for our students and ourselves as educators is not just a frivolous activity that only the privileged may engage in, but that it is essential for students, faculty, and staff from all backgrounds to have access to the community we call honors.

With this realization, we made community the central component of our respective programs and allowed it to feed our classroom pedagogy, our advising and counseling, our programming for students and faculty, and all of our communications, including informational bulletins, personal emails to students, and our mission statements. Giving students, staff, and faculty a sense of belonging was central to fostering resilience and success in a time of unprecedented duress. This notion remains true in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Given the necessity and the benefits of community in honors, nothing was more threatening than the restrictions of COVID-19. The importance of community has not changed; we are now simply more aware of it. To some, the sense of community might have become even more important than before. What we learned, through trial and error, was how to nourish community within our programs regardless of distance and the altered modality of delivery. What we learned, too, was that it could be done.

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HONORS ONLINE

Teaching, Learning, and Building Community Virtually in Honors Education

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NATIONAL COLLEGIATE
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