

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Building Virtual Community: The Power of Peer-Led Engagement

EMILY CLOSSIN, SHANE COLLINS, LISA RUCH,
KRISTINA HORN SHEELER, AND KARA M. WOODLEE
INDIANA UNIVERSITY—PURDUE UNIVERSITY INDIANAPOLIS¹

It feels great to see that so many students are interested in being a part of a virtual community. The transition from an in-person experience to a virtual platform was big, and initially, students felt disconnected, but through the virtual events we have helped create a strong virtual community for our honors members to learn and grow together.

—Unnati Nayak (IUPUI Honors College Social Media Intern)

The role of learning communities and their positive impact on academic performance, feelings of belonging, retention, and engagement has been the focus of much research (Zhao and Kuh; Pike, Kuh, and McCormick; Rocconi). This research, however, has primarily focused on curricular space. Following the research by Nichols and

Chang, other honors scholars such as Kampfe, Chasek, and Falconer looked at engagement and retention in honors between lower- and upper-division students. Overall, they found that peer influence was the least important reason for students to remain in the honors program. They noted, however, that lower-division students identified the student community as an important factor influencing their decision to remain in honors (Kampfe, Chasek, and Falconer 226).

We contend that the student community is more important than ever in helping students become and remain connected. In *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*, Terrell L. Strayhorn reviews the research on belonging, finding community, and the strong, positive connection to academic performance and retention (2-3). He builds on the findings of Joseph L. White and James H. Cones III who note the "important and powerful role" of peers "in facilitating sense of belonging" (2). Fostering community and a sense of belonging is more important and more challenging than ever before because of the increased demand for hybrid and virtual modalities in addition to traditional face-to-face formats. Our focus here is on building virtual community, where community is broadly defined. We are not limiting our definition to a learning community although some of our students do participate in an honors living-learning community, nor are we focusing on the classroom space. Our vantage point is on engagement with our entire student community outside the curricular space to make sure that first-year students feel welcome and that all students feel a sense of belonging and connection.

The Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) Honors College developed a multi-layered strategy to foster interpersonal connection and a sense of belonging among incoming students as well as continued opportunities for engagement among the entire community of scholars. Via social media posts and takeovers, peer mentor commitment, and virtual activities organized and led by students, along with more traditional face-to-face events, our new students developed connections, relationships, and a sense of identity as honors scholars. Our continuing students took on new leadership roles in the honors college, displaying their talents and contributing in ways they had not before in face-to-face formats. This chapter will share our strategies for building virtual community and its correlation

with our strong retention in honors at IUPUI and our students' sense of belonging and connection. We will start by sharing our efforts to enhance virtual community in fall 2020 and student survey responses to our efforts, followed by what we learned from the experience and plan to retain going forward.

OUR VIRTUAL TRANSITION

All honors college student organizations are charged with planning student events, often with assistance from their advisor and the honors college staff. What we realized, however, is that each student organization tends to work independently from the others and may rely a great deal on their advisor. Virtual organizing created the opportunity for student leaders to work together across organizations and for more students to take on leadership roles. To that end, we surveyed students early to ask what they wanted to participate in or lead. We said yes whenever possible and allowed students to create and organize their events, which led to several creative Zoom sessions on everything from virtual yoga to dance aerobics.

To foster collaboration, we reorganized our fall 2020 Open House so that each student organization had a place on the planned virtual program. Each organization presented its events for the semester and actively recruited members. While we normally hold an in-person Open House each fall with student organizations in attendance, creating a program with everyone sharing their plans with the entire student body in real time (or watching later) was a new feature. This shift allowed students to put together a communication plan that would be attractive to their peers and generate feedback on future ideas. We also turned the responsibility for this event over to our Honors College Student Council, a crucial decision as we realized later.

Social media was a salient part of our virtual strategy. Our student council president and other student leaders took it upon themselves to connect each organization on social media. As a result, when one student or organization posted an event or activity, others retweeted or shared the event to amplify exposure. Additionally, we hired a social media intern, an honors college student who was a student organization leader, to coordinate social media efforts beyond our student organizations. For example, the intern created opportunities

to feature students during specific times of the semester such as First-Generation Student Week, International Week, and other key moments during the academic calendar. She requested brief bios from students, and those who responded were highlighted, connecting additional voices to our virtual community. We enabled students to take over our social media account as well. Students took followers through their day and answered important questions such as how they planned an honors contract or what they liked about research or volunteer activities. The result was a web of interaction that bolstered the sense of community rather than one student or organization posting independently to limited followers.

PEER MENTOR COMMITMENT

[T]he peer mentors were more important than ever, especially for building community. . . . Connecting with incoming students was more than answering questions about college but was providing a space to build relationships when it was hard to make new friends.

—Michila Weddle (Three-Year Peer Mentor)

The Honors College Peer Mentor Program provides one-on-one mentoring for incoming students as well as social events that are open to everyone in the program. We can accommodate just over half of our incoming students annually with approximately forty returning students serving as mentors. In addition to the mentors, we have a council of seven peer mentor leaders who are the student voice of the program. The Leader Council developed approaches for this program to run on a virtual platform that we have continued to use since the return to campus.

Although many of our whole group social programs are in person, we have found that virtual activities also attract students. We have offered two different virtual social events. The first was an online movie trivia contest, with gift cards as prizes, that was created by one of the peer mentor leaders using Kahoot. The second was a virtual “meet and greet” event using Glimpse, a networking app. The app essentially replicates an in-person mixer by pairing students in breakout rooms to get to know one another. Glimpse includes features such as games, icebreaker questions, a social media sharing feature, and a virtual

photobooth. Students who took part in the Glimpse event provided brief reviews of their experiences: “Glimpse seemed like a really great way to just meet a bunch of people at one event, and it seemed like a fun way to get to know someone.” “I liked how it matched us and then supplied us with games and icebreaker[s].” Students were paired with another student for five minutes in each breakout room. The reviews indicated that five minutes was not long enough. The version of Glimpse that we used for this event was free although there were nominal fee versions available that could have added enhanced features to the event. Currently, Glimpse is moving away from its individual platform and will be teaming with Twine to create speed networking breakout rooms for Zoom. The partnership with Zoom could make our students more comfortable with using this program since they are quite familiar with using Zoom already.

Our mentors have also found creative ways to conduct their one-on-one meetings virtually with their mentees. The Peer Mentor Leader Council provided support for virtual mentoring by adding several resources to the Honors Peer Mentor Canvas site. Some of the resources came from the mentors themselves; we had polled the group of new mentors to ask about their ideas for virtual mentoring and compiled them in the Canvas site. We have found that some mentors and mentees prefer to meet over Zoom exclusively or use a combination of in-person and Zoom meetings. Mentors who meet over Zoom have introduced their mentees to other students in the program by having group mentoring sessions with other mentors and mentees. The virtual platform creates much more flexibility in meeting times, allowing for larger group meetings such as these. Mentors also play some popular online games with their mentees such as Gathertown, Backyard.co, and Among Us to build rapport. Ultimately, the opportunity for virtual mentoring has stretched the students’ perception of what can be done to create community. Virtual mentoring has allowed for more flexibility in meeting styles and locations and has pushed the mentors to develop new ways to bond with their mentees.

VIRTUAL SERVICE: ACADEMICS FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Academics for Civic Engagement (ACE) is our student-led community service organization. Historically, all events planned by ACE were

face-to-face and mostly held off campus in cooperation with community partners. The group typically planned 1-2 service projects per month that were held on the weekends. Going into the 2020–2021 academic year, ACE adjusted its approach to remain active as an organization by offering opportunities for more students to be involved. They conceptualized an innovative approach to service by doing it virtually. The student leaders researched organizations that offered the ability to volunteer online, such as the Smithsonian, and provided these resources to members. Service events were facilitated via Zoom. Participants logged into the event from their own device, signed in and out on a web-based shared document to track attendance, and completed virtual service during the set event time together. Participants could choose the online organization with which they would volunteer during that time period. Providing that choice allowed more students to contribute their time to an organization they cared about at each event; in contrast, an in-person volunteer event would designate only a single community partner, thus offering no options. Examples of their online service include transcribing historical documents, creating digital maps of unmapped areas, and translating documents to English from other languages. Each event had a leader who started and ended the event and facilitated opportunities for students to interact with each other by discussing the projects on which they were working. In this way, the participants still experienced the community-building benefits of an in-person service event while serving a variety of organizations from their own login location. In addition to the virtual events, they offered in-person events both in the fall and spring semesters doing river clean up and city landscaping projects.

Throughout the year, ACE took full advantage of the flexibility provided by the virtual setting, and they saw their member participation increase exponentially. Not only were they able to offer events more frequently and with a greater variety of days and times, but they could also increase the capacity of the virtual events compared to in-person events. Because virtual service events do not require coordinating with community partners to choose event dates, the event leaders were able to expand their virtual events to weekdays and evenings based on member requests. They also varied their event lengths to meet the needs of their membership. The virtual events provided participants with a variety of options so they could choose a

project that best fit their interests, thereby increasing engagement with the service itself in addition to engaging with their peers. Other virtual strategies ACE implemented included creating a digital newsletter and starting a social media account.

VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP: HONORS COLLEGE STUDENT COUNCIL

The Honors College Student Council (HCSC) began the 2020–2021 academic year with two goals: 1) to increase participation and community within HCSC itself and 2) to build relationships and community across all the honors college student organizations. Since in-person meetings would not allow all members to attend because two of the HCSC participants were international students living abroad, HCSC opted to move from bimonthly in-person meetings to shorter, weekly Zoom meetings. The weekly virtual meetings created a more consistent community for students to connect to without overstraining their schedules. HCSC also increased its communication using various messaging apps such as GroupMe.

To accomplish the goal of building community across all honors student organizations, HCSC transformed one of our honors college signature events, our fall semester Honors Open House. The open house is an opportunity for first-year students to familiarize themselves with the various honors student organizations and meet honors peers. The open house is typically organized by honors staff, but to transform it from a physical to a digital space would require a great deal of work and coordination. Here HCSC stepped in and led the way in terms of designing the layout and schedule, communicating with other student leaders, and organizing the new virtual open house. It was an incredible success with better participation than we have had in recent years.

In the spring, HCSC created what we hope will become another signature event, a virtual talent show, in collaboration with our Honors Arts & Culture Society. HCSC worked directly with other honors organizations to solicit student submissions of artwork or audio/video files and create a website to display them. Students submitted their talents via Canvas, our learning management system, and HCSC created a Google website to display the work. All students were able to vote on their favorites, and winners in each category received honors college merchandise. HCSC typically hosts a few events each academic

year, and the desire to promote community virtually prompted them to be even more creative than normal. They were proud that despite all the challenges of the year, they contributed in meaningful ways to the honors college community.

INCREASING ACCESS AND ENGAGEMENT: ALPHA LAMBDA DELTA/PHI ETA SIGMA

Alpha Lambda Delta/Phi Eta Sigma (ALD/PES) is the national first-year student honor society in which our campus chapter is a recognized leader. ALD/PES welcomes students who are members of the honors college and those who are not as long as they earn at least a 3.5 GPA during their first semester. Our campus chapter welcomes 350–450 new students each year, and in 2021, we had an increase in interest from incoming students compared to the previous year.

ALD/PES members engage in many in-person meetings as well as service and social events. Members gather together to carve and paint pumpkins for fun and shop for families in need during the holidays. They volunteer with Indy Parks by engaging in outdoor work during a Halloween event and a spring cleanup day. They also carried out one of their service themes—promoting literacy—by holding a book drive, volunteering for a local organization that provides free supplies to public school teachers, and helping sort books at a local school's warehouse for distribution to its students. We have also given members a chance to try something new by making no-sew blankets for a local homeless shelter. ALD/PES provided the yarn and held a how-to session over Zoom. This activity was highly successful, and the feedback was quite positive.

Realizing that not all students are able to attend in-person events, the officers and chapter advisor provided access to virtual monthly meetings via Zoom; they included an interactive component that infused some energy into the sessions. For example, members shared something new they decided to try in the past few years. Examples included such things as volunteering for an animal rescue, learning to play a musical instrument, studying a new language, and taking a free online class about doing digital art. The students asked each other questions and gained some new ideas for how to make the most of their time and be productive. In another meeting, students shared

their hobbies and provided information about how to get involved in those hobbies. Once again, students had an opportunity to talk about themselves while offering new ideas to others. Chapter officers also facilitated group interaction just for fun by using breakout rooms for a team scavenger hunt. They also held a virtual Escape Room event during one of the meetings. In addition, each meeting includes a presentation by a staff or faculty member on a topic relevant to students, such as a presentation by our Counseling and Psychological Services office on dealing with stress through mindfulness. Although many students enjoy face-to-face interaction, a benefit of virtual meetings is the ability to reach a greater number of students because we can record all the meetings for later viewing by those students who could not attend. In addition to our Zoom meetings, officers created a GroupMe account to maintain frequent contact with each other.

ALD/PES has also increased its presence on Facebook and Instagram to keep members informed and involved and to spotlight students' accomplishments. Posts demonstrate that students are actively engaged, and they regularly feature the many achievements of students such as being recognized as one of IUPUI's Top 100 students, winning scholarships and awards, and presenting at virtual conferences. ALD/PES has also used social media as a substitute for an annual dance to raise funds for pediatric cancer research in honor of a former student who passed away from brain cancer. The students created a "Stay at Home, Slay at Home" fashion show contest showing off their best pandemic wear, and one member took orders and created digital art portraits for a small donation to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

Finally, ALD/PES has taken advantage of the many new cost-friendly and convenient opportunities provided by the virtual environment that would not have been available as face-to-face activities because of inadequate funding or a time commitment away from campus. While sending large numbers of students to a conference is usually cost prohibitive because of the expense of transportation, lodging, food, and registration fees, ALD/PES has supported numerous free or low-cost virtual conference opportunities for a substantial number of students these past few years. While the organization can provide funding for two students to attend the Alpha Lambda Delta conference in person, fifteen students attended the virtual conference

in 2021. Additionally, four students collaborated on a presentation for the conference entitled “Be the Game Changer During the Pandemic.” Normally a handful of students attend the Phi Eta Sigma conference, but twenty-nine students were able to attend virtually in 2021. In addition, members presented at the free virtual Alpha Lambda Delta Leadership Summit and the low-cost Mid-East Honors Association virtual conference. All these great opportunities would not have been possible in an exclusively in-person format: this benefit is one of the advantages provided by the virtual environment. While in-person conferences offer many opportunities that virtual conferences do not, perhaps conference organizers will take note of the advantages and continue to provide a virtual option in some format to reach a larger audience and accommodate those members who lack the funding or the ability to take the time away from school. (See two essays on online conferences in this volume: Sara E. Quay et al., “Re-Reading Local Spaces: City as Text™ Goes Virtual” and Jon Blandford et al., “Cultivating Delight, Crossing Divides, and Solving Impossible Problems: Lessons Learned from a Year of Virtual Conferences.”)

SURVEY OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION, BELONGING, AND CONNECTION

We offered several virtual opportunities for students to interact with their honors peers, and we transferred the responsibility of leadership to our returning scholars. But did those efforts help students foster or deepen a sense of connection with our honors college community? Based on our survey data, the answer is yes. All honors college students were invited during the spring 2021 semester to participate in a survey on their virtual and face-to-face participation in honors college activities the previous semester. We had a 22% response rate: 220 of our 1,004 total students responded to the survey. Of those 220, 91 students who responded were also part of the 175 students in their first semester. Of the 829 returning scholars, 117 of them replied; another 12 students began the survey but did not finish it. (The complete survey can be found in Appendix A.)

Students were asked if they participated in virtual honors college events or activities and why. Thirty-three first-semester scholars

selected yes as did twenty-six returning scholars. The most popular reasons first-year scholars participated in virtual events included the following: “To meet my fellow honors college scholars,” “To learn more about my responsibilities as an honors scholar,” and “To connect with the honors college.” For returning scholars, the most cited reasons to participate in virtual events were as follows: “To develop relationships with my fellow honors scholars,” “To connect with the honors college,” and “To meet my fellow honors college scholars.” To meet others, develop relationships, and make connections dominated the reasons students gave for their participation.

We asked students to indicate their agreement with a series of statements on participation in honors college events and their feelings of connection using a seven-point Likert-scale, where one indicates strong disagreement and seven indicates strong agreement. (See Table 1.) We had strong overall agreement from first-year students with statements about participation in honors college events and feelings of importance and happiness about the decision to attend our university and join the honors college. The strongest overall agreement was with the following statement: “Participating in Honors College events made me feel like I am an important member of the Honors College community.” We were also happy to see strong agreement with the statement that participating in honors college events made students want to participate even more in the future.

The majority of first-year scholars indicated at least slight agreement with the statement that participating in honors college events made them more likely to enroll in the spring. While retention of our incoming class has been stable and strong (> 96%) in recent years, the pandemic made enrollment and retention a priority for many universities. The fall to spring retention rate of our 2020 incoming scholars was 96%, with retention of scholars who participated in our peer mentor program closer to 97%; retention of our continuing scholars fall to spring was 94.2%.

Feelings of connection and community were particularly strong among our returning students, with at least half selecting moderate or strong agreement with questions indicating their happiness in joining our campus and the honors college and feeling like they are an important member of our community. (See Table 2.)

Table 1. Spring 2021 Results for First-Year Scholars

First-Year Scholars	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
Participating in Honors College events made me feel connected to the Honors College.	0.00%	7.41%	22.22%	3.70%	22.22%	29.63%	14.81%	4.89
Participating in Honors College events made me feel connected to my Honors College peers.	7.41%	14.81%	11.11%	14.81%	14.81%	18.52%	18.52%	4.44
Participating in Honors College events made me more likely to enroll in classes in the spring.	0.00%	7.41%	22.22%	3.70%	22.22%	29.63%	14.81%	4.67
Participating in Honors College events made me happy about my decision to attend IUPUI.	0.00%	3.70%	3.70%	22.22%	18.52%	25.93%	25.93%	5.37
Participating in the Honors College events made me happy about my decision to join the Honors College.	0.00%	3.70%	11.11%	7.41%	14.81%	33.33%	29.63%	5.52
Participating in Honors College events made me feel like I am an important member of the Honors College community.	7.69%	7.69%	7.69%	7.69%	19.23%	19.23%	30.77%	5.04
Participating in Honors College events made me want to participate even more in future semesters.	0.00%	15.38%	0.00%	11.54%	19.23%	26.92%	26.92%	5.23

Table 2. Spring 2021 Results for Returning Scholars

Returning Scholars	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
Participating in Honors College events made me feel connected to the Honors College.	0.00%	0.00%	5.26%	15.79%	36.84%	21.05%	21.05%	5.36
Participating in Honors College events made me feel connected to my Honors College peers.	0.00%	0.00%	10.53%	15.79%	21.05%	26.32%	26.32%	5.42
Participating in Honors College events made me more likely to enroll in classes in the spring.	10.53%	10.53%	5.26%	42.11%	5.26%	5.26%	21.05%	4.21
Participating in Honors College events made me happy about my decision to attend IUPUI.	0.00%	5.26%	0.00%	31.58%	10.53%	10.53%	42.11%	5.47
Participating in the Honors College events made me happy about my decision to join the Honors College.	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	11.11%	27.78%	16.67%	44.44%	5.94
Participating in Honors College events made me feel like I am an important member of the Honors College community.	0.00%	5.56%	5.56%	16.67%	22.22%	27.78%	22.22%	5.33
Participating in Honors College events made me want to participate even more in future semesters.	0.00%	0.00%	5.26%	15.79%	21.05%	31.58%	26.32%	5.58

We asked students another series of questions on belonging that mirrored a campus-level survey of entering students using the same seven-point Likert-scale. On the campus survey, our incoming honors scholars indicated a slightly higher level of agreement with each statement than did our campus population on questions related to feelings of belonging on campus (Rauch). (See Table 3.)

We adjusted the language of the campus survey to ask about feelings of belonging in the IUPUI Honors College. (See Table 4.) Incoming scholars who participated in honors college events indicated comparable levels of agreement to the campus survey responses while returning scholars who took part in honors college events indicated much higher levels of agreement with statements on belonging.

Moreover, scholars who did not participate in any honors college events indicated much lower levels of agreement with statements on belonging. (See Table 5.)

Overall, we were pleased with the results of this survey, especially because students' sense of connection and belonging correlated with participating in honors college events in virtual and face-to-face formats. Importantly, these events were peer-led, adding support to the research of Strayhorn and others on the powerful role that peers play in fostering a sense of connection.

INSTITUTIONALIZING PEER-LED VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT

We learned many important lessons that we plan to carry forward, not the least of which is the power of peers working together to shape a common experience for all. During the 2020–2021 academic year, our student leaders may have felt even more responsibility to create ways for their peers to engage. Student organizations met via Zoom more often than they would have met face-to-face; they offered both virtual and in-person activities and made use of alternative apps and platforms. All students were encouraged to lend their voice whenever possible, be it through social media takeovers, sharing their individual interests and talents, or just offering their input on what they and their peers might enjoy. Importantly, our experience illustrates the power of peers having these new virtual experiences together. Not only did students come away with a strong sense of connection and a new skill or information facilitated by their peers, but they had a unique common

Table 3. Spring 2021 Results for First-Year Scholars (Rauch)

Statements on Belonging	All Beginner Mean (N=1030)	Honors Beginner Mean (N=72)
The IUPUI campus community has made me feel welcome.	5.82	5.88
I see myself as part of the IUPUI community.	5.37	5.64
I feel that I fit right in on campus.	5.37	5.45
I feel a sense of belonging to IUPUI.	5.36	5.4
I feel that I am a member of the IUPUI Community.	5.22	5.3

Table 4. Belonging Survey Results for Incoming Students Participating in Honors Events

Statements on Belonging	Mean: Entering Students with participation	Mean: Returning Students with participation
The IUPUI Honors College community has made me feel welcome.	5.54	6.37
I see myself as part of the IUPUI Honors College community.	5.54	6.05
I feel that I fit right in in the IUPUI Honors College.	5.31	6.16
I feel a sense of belonging to IUPUI Honors College.	5.23	6.16
I feel that I am a member of the IUPUI Honors College community.	5.54	6.37

**Table 5. Belonging Survey Results for Incoming Students
Not Participating in Honors Events**

Statements on Belonging	Mean: Entering Students no participation	Mean: Returning Students no participation
The IUPUI Honors College community has made me feel welcome.	5.18	4.96
I see myself as part of the IUPUI Honors College community.	5.12	4.59
I feel that I fit right in in the IUPUI Honors College.	5.04	4.76
I feel a sense of belonging to IUPUI Honors College.	4.94	4.37
I feel that I am a member of the IUPUI Honors College community.	5.04	4.54

experience, one that none had ever had before in a digital space. It will be something that connects them regardless of where their paths take them.

Our peer mentors compiled several resources for virtual mentoring that we housed in the Canvas site for the mentor program. We hope our students continue to use these resources because we now see that mentoring can be effective in a virtual environment. Virtual mentoring is now being promoted during mentor training as a more engaging way to allow mentors and mentees to start connecting over the summer rather than relying on email and text messaging only. During the semester, one of the challenges our students have historically faced with this program is finding the time within their busy schedules to meet. In the future when identifying mutual meeting times becomes difficult, meeting virtually will provide more options. Additionally, the pandemic motivated the mentors to find more ways to meet in

groups than they would in a normal year because they really wanted the mentees to find their community within the honors college. As honors college peer mentor leader Myra Hussain noted, “The group meetings helped both the mentors and the mentees build community and be heard.” Moving forward, we hope to see more group mentoring sessions planned in addition to one-on-one meetings since they were a great way for students to broaden their social network.

We also realized that there were instances when student organizations needed to do less. With traditional in-person events facing attendance challenges because of busy schedules and students experiencing Zoom fatigue from the abundance of online opportunities, the organization had to decide which events needed an online alternative and which to forgo. The Honors College Student Council realized, however, that when building an online community, there are no reasons to shy away from ambitious and complex projects. The students involved in HCSC thrived while coordinating events with multiple groups and individuals, all while never meeting face-to-face. Students rallied around the knowledge that what they created would have real impact on the honors college community.

The student leaders of ACE identified practices and strategies they plan to continue in the future. They learned the value of being flexible, creative, and willing to try new things. They expanded how our students define “service” and broadened their awareness of the various avenues that exist to serve the community. Because of increased participation during the past year, ACE plans to continue offering virtual events in the future while also expanding its in-person events. This adjustment will allow them to engage in service at a wider variety of days and times, opening opportunities to participate, which were not there before, to a greater number of students. They identified the need for digital communication to reach more members in the virtual spaces in which they are most active, and they will build on their newsletter and social media presence to engage with their members more frequently and to advertise events. Lastly, the student leaders realized that to offer more events, they need the members to take on more responsibility; thus they intend to increase member involvement with the selection and planning of service events. According to ACE president Molly Pederson, “We wanted to get feedback directly from students and hear what they thought worked and didn’t work.”

ACE will expand its elected leadership roles through the creation of committees that will assist with brainstorming and creating new events as well as building on the community partnerships they have already developed. This strategy will provide more opportunities for student leadership development that will support the longevity of the club and will also diversify the service events, both virtual and face-to-face, offered by the organization.

ALD/PES was initially skeptical about how successful they would be at keeping the chapter afloat in this all-new adventure into a virtual environment. Yet they managed to succeed at most endeavors, albeit sometimes through trial and error. In fact, our Alpha Lambda Delta chapter was recognized by the national organization's headquarters as one of the top chapters in the country for the nineteenth year in a row based upon a digital scrapbook members submitted at the end of the school year to document their accomplishments. For an organization with a strong focus on community service, chapter leaders had to be creative in developing ways to continue their mission. The leadership team had to produce new ideas for small in-person activities for those who wanted them, and leaders also found volunteer opportunities that could be completed virtually and on an individual basis. Regarding regular one-hour monthly meetings, chapter officers realized they had to provide time for interaction and an entertaining speaker to keep members engaged and interested in a virtual environment. They also recognized that they needed to be enthusiastic as they used social media to effectively market their plans. It was important for members to have fun, to share their experiences, and to provide feedback after their events.

Officers also discovered that it was more convenient for many members to meet via Zoom, resulting in increased attendance at some meetings. According to ALD/PES member Faith Prochaska, "It is helpful to have these types of online events to help students who live off campus get more easily involved." ALD/PES plans to continue offering a virtual option for many in-person meetings and events. The most important lesson we have learned is that the membership is more capable of adapting to challenging and changing situations when all work collectively to set goals and achieve them. The leadership team adjusted remarkably to virtual engagement and carried on with a plan for another award-winning year.

CONCLUSION

Beginning in March 2020, our virtual experiment created a situation in which our students stepped into leadership roles willingly to facilitate relationships and community with our incoming students and among returning students. Our experience corroborates the research on the importance of peer-led engagement opportunities; the leadership of our students was instrumental in our ability to continue our strong trajectory of retention in the honors college. Moreover, our students who took part in honors college events showed a keen sense of belonging and connection to our community. We learned many important lessons, not the least of which were flexibility and being courageous enough to try new things. We trusted our students, and they delivered tenfold.

ENDNOTE

¹ Skye Aitken served as a student research assistant on this essay. Student quotations included in this essay are from Aitken's news article "[IUPUI Honors College: Creating the Blueprint for a Virtual Community](#)."

WORKS CITED

- Aitlen, Skye. "[IUPUI Honors College: Creating the Blueprint for a Virtual Community](#)." 22 Mar. 2021.
- Blandford, Jon, Kathy J. Cooke, Erik Liddell, Kathryn M. MacDonald, and Tara M. Tuttle "Cultivating Delight, Crossing Divides, and Solving Impossible Problems: Lessons Learned from a Year of Virtual Conferences." *Honors Online: Teaching, Learning, and Building Community Virtually in Honors Education*, edited by Victoria M. Bryan and Cat Stanfield, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2024, pp. 189–209.
- Kampfe, Jessica A., Christine L. Chasek, and John Falconer. "An Examination of Student Engagement and Retention in an Honors Program." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2016, pp. 219–35.
- Nichols, Timothy J., and Kuo-Liang "Matt" Chang. "Factors Influencing Honors College Recruitment, Persistence, and Satisfaction at an Upper-Midwest Land Grant University." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2013, pp. 105–27.

- Pike, Gary R., George D. Kuh, and Alexander C. McCormick. "An Investigation of the Contingent Relationships between Learning Community Participation and Student Engagement." *Research in Higher Education*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2010, pp. 300–22.
- Quay, Sara E., Season Ellison, Leslie Heaphy, Amaris Ketcham, Toni Lefton, and Andrew Martino. "Re-Reading Local Spaces: City as Text™ Goes Virtual." *Honors Online: Teaching, Learning, and Building Community Virtually in Honors Education*, edited by Victoria M. Bryan and Cat Stanfield, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2024, pp. 143–67.
- Rauch, Jessica T. "IUPUI Honors College New Beginning Students Entering Student Survey Report 2020." Institutional Research and Decision Support, Feb. 2021.
- Rocconi, Louis M. "The Impact of Learning Communities on First Year Students' Growth and Development in College." *Research in Higher Education*, vol. 52, 2010, pp. 178–93.
- Strayhorn, Terrell L. *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*. Routledge, 2019.
- White, Joseph L., and James H. Cones III. *Black Man Emerging: Facing the Past and Seizing a Future in America*. Routledge, 1999.
- Zhao, Chun-Mei, and George D. Kuh, "Adding Value: Learning Communities and Student Engagement." *Research in Higher Education*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2004, pp. 115–38.

APPENDIX A

BUILDING VIRTUAL COMMUNITY: THE POWER OF PEER-LED ENGAGEMENT

Fall semester 2020 was my first semester as an Honors College scholar.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Did you participate in Honors College events last semester, either face-to-face or virtually?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

What VIRTUAL Honors College events or activities have you participated in?
Select all that apply.

- ☐ Glimpse Meet and Greet Event with the Peer Mentor Program
- ☐ Peer Mentor Welcome Event
- ☐ Trivia Night with Peer Mentors
- ☐ Jazzercise
- ☐ Social Media Takeovers
- ☐ Honors Contract Workshop
- ☐ Honors College Open House and Student Organization Introductions
- ☐ Honors College Orientation and Advising Session
- ☐ Study Abroad Workshop
- ☐ Virtual Yoga
- ☐ Game Night
- ☐ Virtual Volunteering Events with Academics for Civic Engagement
- ☐ Virtual Museum Scavenger Hunt with Honors Arts and Culture Society
- ☐ Faculty Lecture on “Prejudice and Discrimination: Overcoming Biases” by Professor Medina
- ☐ Faculty Lecture on “Race and Health Inequality in the US: 2020 in Historical Perspective” by Professor Nelson
- ☐ Virtual Student Organization Meetings, please list: _____
- ☐ Other, please list: _____

Why did you choose to participate in these virtual events or activities?
Select all that apply.

- ☐ To learn about the Honors College
- ☐ To learn more about my responsibilities as an Honors Scholar
- ☐ To meet my fellow Honors College Scholars

- ☐ To see my Honors College friends
- ☐ To connect with the Honors College
- ☐ To develop relationships with my fellow Honors Scholars
- ☐ To have fun
- ☐ To win a prize
- ☐ For stress relief, to relax
- ☐ To try something new
- ☐ To earn volunteer hours
- ☐ To learn more about important topics related to racial justice
- ☐ Other, please list your reason: _____

What FACE-TO-FACE Honors College events or activities did you participate in last semester. *Select all that apply.*

- ☐ Mug decorating with the Peer Mentor Program
- ☐ Mask decorating with the Peer Mentor Program
- ☐ Yoga with the Peer Mentor Program
- ☐ Canvas painting with instruction from Herron Peer Mentor
- ☐ Canal walk with the Peer Mentor Program
- ☐ Outdoor Canvas Painting with the Arts and Culture Society
- ☐ Fall Festival at Newfields with Honors Arts and Culture Society
- ☐ Monon Trail clean up
- ☐ Pumpkin carving with the Honors RBLC
- ☐ Volunteering at Teacher's Treasures and Warren Township Schools
- ☐ Cultural Train Clean Up with Academics for Civic Engagement
- ☐ Other, please list other face-to-face Honors College events you participated in last semester: _____

Why did you choose to participate in these face-to-face Honors College events or activities? *Select all that apply.*

- ☐ To meet my fellow Honors Scholars
- ☐ To see my Honors College friends
- ☐ To connect with the Honors College
- ☐ To develop relationships with my fellow Honors Scholars
- ☐ To have fun
- ☐ For stress relief, to relax
- ☐ To win a prize
- ☐ To do something for my community
- ☐ To try something new
- ☐ To get out of my apartment/off the computer
- ☐ To earn volunteer hours
- ☐ Other, please write your other reasons here: _____

Indicate the extent of your agreement with each statement.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Moderately Disagree; 3 = Slightly Disagree; 4 = Neither Disagree nor Agree; 5 = Slightly Agree; 6 = Moderately Agree; 7 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Participating in Honors College events made me feel connected to the Honors College.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in Honors College events made me feel connected to my Honors College peers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in Honors College events made me more likely to enroll in classes in the spring.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in Honors College events made me happy about my decision to attend IUPUI.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in Honors College events made me happy about my decision to join the Honors College.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in Honors College events made me feel like I am an important member of the Honors College community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in Honors College events made me want to participate even more in future semesters?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What events or activities do you hope the Honors College continues in future semesters? Why? _____

Did you lead or organize any Honors College events last semester?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Why did you choose to organize or lead Honors College events, either face-to-face or virtually? Select all that apply.

- ☐ To develop my leadership skills
☐ Because it is expected of my leadership role in one of the Honors College student organizations
☐ Because it is a way to express my creativity
☐ Because it would be fun
☐ Because it is important to give back to my community
☐ Because it helped me make connection with my Honors College peers
☐ Because I wanted to help my Honors peers connect with one another
☐ Because I enjoy working with others in this area
☐ Because I felt strongly about students being able to connect as much as possible during virtual learning
☐ For another reason, please list it here: _____

Indicate the extent of your agreement with each statement.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Moderately Disagree; 3 = Slightly Disagree; 4 = Neither Disagree nor Agree; 5 = Slightly Agree; 6 = Moderately Agree; 7 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Leading Honors College events made me feel connected to the Honors College.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leading Honors College events made me feel connected to my Honors College peers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leading Honors College events made me more likely to enroll in classes in the spring.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leading Honors College events made me happy about my decision to attend IUPUI.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leading Honors College events made me feel like I am an important member of the Honors College community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leading Honors College events made me want to get involved even more in the spring.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leading Honors College events allowed me to grow my leadership skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Indicate the extent of your agreement with each statement.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Moderately Disagree; 3 = Slightly Disagree; 4 = Neither Disagree nor Agree; 5 = Slightly Agree; 6 = Moderately Agree; 7 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The IUPUI Honors College community has made me feel welcome.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I see myself as part of the IUPUI Honors College community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that I fit right in in the IUPUI Honors College.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that I am a member of the IUPUI Honors College community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

HONORS ONLINE

Teaching, Learning, and Building Community Virtually in Honors Education

Victoria M. Bryan AND
Cat Stanfield, EDITORS

Series Editor | Jeffrey A. Portnoy
Perimeter College, Georgia State University
National Collegiate Honors Council
Monograph Series

Copyright © 2024 by National Collegiate Honors Council

Manufactured in the United States

National Collegiate Honors Council

440 N. 17th Street
250 Knoll
Lincoln, NE 68588
nchchonors.org

Production Editor | Design Layout
Wes Hollywood & Beth Roman
blackout design

International Standard Book Number
978-1-945001-24-6

