

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Transcending Distance: Connecting During Imposed Seclusion

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In 2016, Georgia State University (GSU), an R1 university situated in downtown Atlanta, was consolidated with Georgia Perimeter College, which had six campuses (including a robust online campus) located around metropolitan Atlanta. Perimeter College became the two-year access college of GSU. The Perimeter Honors Program became part of the GSU Honors College, and the university embarked on new initiatives to unite the two honors communities. As part of the revision of GSU's strategic plan and its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, the honors college recently surveyed its faculty and students at all seven campuses. The results were somewhat mixed, especially for our online campus: we discovered some problems with the sense of community in honors as well as some real opportunities to address them. While some people might take the timing of the revelation that people were feeling siloed in their respective campuses at Perimeter to

be disastrous (after all, during a global pandemic, most of us felt more isolated than ever), we took it to be largely advantageous.

Although Perimeter College offers an extensive array of online honors courses, and has for many years, our online community has not been well served. For instance, in my five years working with honors prior to the pandemic, we had never organized a single event just for our online honors students. The pandemic-inspired movement to remote teaching and learning actually proved to be a godsend in terms of our rethinking the nature of honors community by offering a new perspective that allowed us to envision all kinds of opportunities ahead. We engaged this challenge head on; in the process, we created some successful cross-campus community-building opportunities, including musical events like the ones discussed below that involved honors faculty, in an effort to provide students an opportunity to develop relationships with faculty members and other students outside of the classroom.

One initiative we launched to combat the malaise and isolation from the pandemic was a spring speaker series. The honors college has always been very good about hosting guest speakers with a wide range of expertise, from published authors giving readings to journalists and historians discussing their research. But some of our events have struggled to attract a sufficient number of students, which can be problematic since we rely on student activity fee funding to support these events. We typically have to document attendance and occasionally come up short. Hosting these scholars and writers virtually produced three great benefits: the events were cost effective because we did not incur expenses for food, lodging, and travel; we were able to secure speakers from all over the country because we did not have logistical issues and time constraints as obstacles to scheduling events; and we were able to maximize participation, albeit virtual, across all of our campuses.

We hosted or co-hosted speakers such as Natasha Tretheway, who read from and discussed her new book *Memorial Drive*; Will Anderson, an alumnus of the honors college who now works for the Georgia Bureau of Investigations (GBI) and conducts autopsies; Dr. Carrie Reed, who conducts research for the Centers for Disease

Control (CDC) on the flu virus and vaccine; Paul Lombardo, an expert on forced sterilization, who discussed the human rights violations happening in Georgia's ICE detention centers; and students from The Hague University of Applied Sciences, who discussed Dutch socio-political positions. Our spring speaker series culminated in an event with Dr. Bernard Lafayette, a Civil Rights icon who marched alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and has devoted his life to educating people on non-violent methods to bring about change. Hearing his tales of time spent in jails—early on as an inmate and later as an educator of non-violence—fascinated our social justice-minded students, but it was the retelling of Dr. Martin Luther King's final days and the final words Lafayette heard King speak that left us all feeling inspired to continue the hard work toward change that is much needed and long overdue.

In these varied sessions, we were absolutely thrilled with the turnout. In our first installment of the spring speaker series, we hosted a session entitled "Morbidity Curiosity: Life as a Death Investigation Specialist," and even on a Friday afternoon, we had about 50 participants. Our session on Human Rights Violations in ICE Detention Centers during International Education Week attracted another large crowd and generated a fascinating and engaging discussion among both faculty and students.

Beyond the workshops and speakers, we hosted several virtual music events aimed at building community and just enjoying each other's company outside the classroom. In the fall, we held an event for students called SINGO. The game is like BINGO but instead of calling numbers, very short clips of popular music are played by a DJ, and those players who can correctly identify the song mark off that square on their SINGO board. When they get five in a row, they win! Our event was held the night before Halloween because we assumed students would not be doing much socially that Friday night because of the shelter-in-place orders, and the musical selections were themed around Halloween across four decades (one decade for each round of the game).



*A Singo Halloween!



A Nightmare on My Street	Season of the Witch	The Addams Family Theme	I'm Your Boogie Man	The Munsters Theme
Black Magic Woman	Highway to Hell	Black Widow	Zombie	Thunderstruck
Li'l Red Riding Hood	Devil's Child	She Wolf	Superstition	Wooly Bully
(Don't Fear) The Reaper	Ghost Town	The Time Warp	(Ghost) Riders in the Sky	Abracadabra
Twilight Zone	Sledge-hammer	Enter Sandman	The X Files Theme	The Devil Went Down to Georgia

Li'l Red Riding Hood	Surfin' Dead	Ghostbusters	Bad Moon Rising	Hells Bells
Werewolves Of London	Le Freak	Monster's Holiday	Black Magic Woman	Halloween Theme
Twilight Zone	The Addams Family Theme	Black Magic	The Devil Went Down to Georgia	They're Coming to Take Me Away
Feed My Frankenstein	House Of The Rising Sun	Abracadabra	Devil Inside	Gypsy Woman
Ding Dong the Witch is Dead	The Purple People Eater	Running With The Devil	Calling All the Monsters	I'm Your Boogie Man

playsingo.com

We held another event called “Acoustic Jam with Dr. Bagley,” which our honors coordinator/historian/eternal gigger dubbed “Like MTV Unplugged with a History Twist.” It was a live music performance themed around social movements, so the playlist was devoted to activist music of the 1960s and beyond. This event was by far my favorite social event of the fall semester, but we did have some technical snafus with hosting the event live on social media. While we learned from these problems, they still prevented us from having the turnout we wanted. Thus, we decided to repeat the event in the spring. Because it was properly promoted the second time, we had much better attendance. The key to success in the online world, we quickly learned, is adaptability.

Because that event was so enjoyable for the faculty and staff who attended, we decided to put on an acoustic social hour just for the honors faculty and staff and the members of the Honors Council. We held it on Zoom, which would allow for chat (by text and voice) without requiring anyone to sign up for or connect on social media. Although we have held honors faculty retreats before, we had never done anything social together because of the logistical nightmare of gathering people from six campuses spread across a large metropolitan area. The event was a first. The crowd was still relatively small; we intentionally scheduled it during final grading, thinking it might provide some respite, but that timing might actually have made it easier to skip or justify skipping it. Nevertheless, the faculty who attended enjoyed it. During the event faculty made special requests and even joined in to sing some songs by Bob Dylan. In a season where we were celebrating birthdays and Christmas and even weddings on virtual platforms, that we would have a virtual faculty mixer seems completely natural. In this way, the rotten situation afforded us a tremendous opportunity to expand our reach in the honors community at Perimeter College: that initiative will remain a priority. Once our online community is more firmly established, and when we return to a normal face-to-face life, I suspect our faculty might even be more likely to travel through Atlanta traffic to another campus in order to socialize with their honors colleagues because we worked to bring them together during a period of great isolation.

Although the world endured many losses because of the COVID-19 virus, including missing the hustle and bustle of seeing and

socializing with our students in person on campus, I am pleased with the way the honors college at Perimeter turned this challenging time into an opportunity to focus on and build the community our students and faculty have told us they want. The key is applying the lessons and experiences from the duration of the pandemic to future honors programming. In a move toward geographical inclusivity, we will continue sponsoring programming that serves our online honors community. For example, we have developed our first online honors book club. In the past, honors had cosponsored offsite live interviews with Pulitzer Prize-winning playwrights that were beamed to the multicasted classrooms on all the campuses, but we are now regularly hosting our face-to-face guest speakers in our campuses' multicast classrooms, where they can be simulcast to a similarly equipped room on each of our brick-and-mortar campuses. Our developing expertise with virtual events certainly informed one of our preeminent programs, our honors-sponsored International Education Week (IEW) Signature Event. We collaborated with The Hague University to host the first ever IEW Signature Event for our online campus: Dutch-American Culture Dialogues. That relationship opened opportunities for both virtual exchanges and continued collaboration during an international travel and study abroad summer course entitled "Honors at The Hague."

We are now adept at archiving virtual events, and our practice is to seek permission from all our speakers to record and archive their presentations. Our plan is to track views of these recorded sessions so we can include that impact in our requests for student activity fee funding. Moreover, we now know we can bring people together meaningfully in shared virtual experiences that will continue in the future to serve and enrich our online honors community.

HONORS ONLINE

Teaching, Learning, and Building Community Virtually in Honors Education

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

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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

