

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# Creating Virtual Honors Spaces with Discord and WebEx

TRISTA M. MERRILL

FINGER LAKES COMMUNITY COLLEGE

CE ROSENOW

LANE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

**A**t two-year colleges, residential living options are limited or non-existent. Students often manage jobs and families, and these obligations typically limit the amount of time they spend at school. Spaces such as an honors lounge, meeting area, or workroom offer places for students to connect with each other outside of the classroom during their time on campus. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, honors programs had to devise virtual spaces that still met students' needs. Both Lane Community College (LCC) in Eugene, Oregon, and Finger Lakes Community College (FLCC) in Canandaigua, New York, selected a different technology to address this situation. LCC uses Discord while FLCC uses WebEx, and the

examples below demonstrate that each platform offers a means for creating virtual honors spaces. These spaces, while valuable during the pandemic, are also useful for commuter or low-residency campuses even when face-to-face classes are available. Students are able to participate in events and be an engaged part of the honors community regardless of their geographical location or inability to come to campus. Furthermore, these innovative ways of reaching students in the disparate places where they already are allow us to build community in a variety of different ways regardless of the nature of the availability and accessibility of the physical spaces around us.

### **DISCORD (CE ROSENOW, LCC)**

In September 2020, I set up a Discord server to create a virtual honors space and augment the information I posted on the honors and Phi Theta Kappa blogs. Based on the positive response, I will be using the server in tandem with the blogs and our physical honors lounge. Discord is a video call application designed for group chats. Groups set up a server to create a virtual space for members with a shared interest in particular topics. The server is divided into text channels and video channels for different communication options. Discord successfully allows us to share information quickly and efficiently through a technology many of the students already use in their personal lives, and it helps us create and maintain a sense of community. Our server supports the needs of two different honors groups: Lane Honors Program and Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society (PTK).

The organization of our honors server is simple. The honors program and PTK each have text and video channels, and we have Welcome, News and Announcements, and Honors Student Lounge channels that contain information and conversations for members of both groups. Students know exactly which channels to visit for the information or discussion they are seeking.

Honors Ambassadors and PTK officers hold weekly office hours on the Honors Student Lounge channel while simultaneously tracking activity in the channels for their respective groups. When students drop in to ask a question or share information, they often encounter student leaders already in the virtual space. These leaders also post information on the relevant channels to keep everyone in our virtual

community up to date. Additionally, students message each other, the Honors Faculty Coordinator, and the PTK advisors privately through Discord. A few of the student leaders have increased authority on the server. They monitor the channels and make sure that content is appropriate. If someone posts in the wrong place, these leaders are able to move the post to the appropriate channel. These responsibilities build leadership skills, and the students can always ask me if they have a question about how to respond to a particular post. Finally, we hold our PTK chapter meetings on the PTK voice channel. Students can opt to have their cameras and microphones on or off. The agenda is posted on the server, the PTK officers lead the meetings, and we have socializing and guest speakers just as we would at an on-campus meeting.

More than one hundred students, some of whom live out of the area, have joined our server and taken advantage of its accessibility. The server is active twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Although office hours are held Monday through Friday, it is not uncommon for someone to post late at night or on weekends and receive a reply from another student. Students stay connected with their honors community in ways they might not otherwise be able to with only an on-campus lounge space and meetings.

### **WEBEX (TRISTA M. MERRILL, FLCC)**

Finger Lakes Community College is a small two-year college nestled in Western New York. Because of our size and the fact that we are an open access college, we want to make honors available to as many students as possible. This accessibility means we have a fluid community of students: some students are fully invested in honors for their entire two years or longer, others drift in and out, and still others drift away and never return. This fluidity can make creating a community a challenge even during the best of times. When COVID-19 hit and we all went virtual, I felt compelled to devise ways to keep students connected to one another and to honors as a whole. I used social media, a blog, and WebEx to accomplish these goals.

One way I have been working on reaching students where they are is through social media. Facebook, Twitter, and a blog are things I used before the pandemic. I have continued to use them by sharing a link with all students currently enrolled in an honors class, as well

as students who have taken an honors class in the past and are still enrolled at FLCC. What I landed on during the quarantine and our all-virtual learning environment was a WebEx talk series featuring someone who is an expert in some area that seemed like it would interest students. Much like Discord, WebEx provides a platform for creating a virtual community through options such as online meetings, video conferencing, and screen sharing. Our talks on WebEx covered a variety of topics. One took place on National Pronouns Day and consisted of a nonbinary librarian who talked about linguistics, history, and their own experiences. Other topics focused on coming out in our current world, the physics of Spider-Man, marginalized genders in gaming, and comparative religion. We also had talks on mindfulness, inclusive heathenry, Earth Day, getting published, and the gaming industry as a career choice. For each talk, we sent invitations to all of our honors students as well as any students who might have a vested interest in the topic. The WebEx events gave students a place to get together and have a conversation on a topic of interest from the comfort of their own homes. Ultimately, attendance was lower than I would have liked, but I was told that it was higher than attendance at Student Corp events that were more recreational in nature. Part of the attendance issue was, I think, that people are worn down and tired. I do plan to continue offering this series both as an in-person event and one where students can tune in remotely.

Making connections with other people suddenly became one of the most important things we could be doing during days of isolation and quarantine. Now that the landscape has changed, we are realizing that each connection we make provides the opportunity for us to reflect on who we are and how we fit into our worlds. All of the events shared here can earn honors points, which is the method by which students can graduate from FLCC with Honors Studies Scholar Status. More importantly, however, they can give students the opportunity to feel like they are part of something bigger than themselves and that they are not alone. I am constantly reminded of a student who, when asked what honors meant to her, simply said, "Home." Our students ARE home right now, whether they want to be or not, so how can we make that an even warmer place for them? One answer is by creating this virtual space for our community.

**CONCLUSION**

Although Discord and WebEx are different platforms that lend themselves to different types of events, they are both useful for creating virtual honors spaces. They can easily be used in addition to other ways of reaching students, such as blogs and social media. Through these virtual spaces, students have an opportunity to gain information, hear guest speakers, and, most importantly, feel connected to their honors community.

# HONORS ONLINE

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## *Teaching, Learning, and Building Community Virtually in Honors Education*

Victoria M. Bryan AND  
Cat Stanfield, EDITORS

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