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2010

## Managing Trouble in Troubled Times: A Responsibility of Honors

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Dudley, Charles, "Managing Trouble in Troubled Times: A Responsibility of Honors" (2010). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 264.

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# Managing Trouble in Troubled Times: A Responsibility of Honors

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Collegiality that exists among people bound together for common purpose requires mutual respect and willingness to support each other's work. Such collegiality is not about friendship, even though friendships may occur, nor does it necessitate agreement to seek the same goals; instead, it implies a collection of scholars pursuing a life of the mind, each seeking to foster the civility that such a life demands. The preparation for assisting students in trouble begins with our willingness to recognize them as colleagues. In the terrible days at Virginia Tech following April 16, 2007, we found solace and solutions in our collegiality.

The best approach to honors students is to acknowledge that they are fully operating adults. This approach is the only and best way to confront the troubles that interrupt academic progress. Trouble requires either capitulation or growth. In a society that treats college as preparation for a job, honors holds out the hope that we can accomplish the crucial task of helping young people become strong and moral leaders in all areas of life. How we assist them achieve such a status determines our success and integrity as a special component of a university. The willingness and courage of our young honors students often defies our expectations, but what they wish for more than anything is that someone—often us—“have their back.”

What we have to offer as academics is the application of reason to the problems our students face. Of course as humans we offer empathy and sometimes sympathy, but usually when problems threaten to overwhelm students, our best approach is to provide calm assistance in helping them think through potential solutions. Most often, students will take control and seek remedies. On occasion, however, students face physical or mental problems that simply cannot be resolved without intervention; in such cases, we assist them in finding the expertise they need by, for instance, escorting them to hospitals or campus health centers. Even in extreme cases, though, a spirit of collegiality in the relationship between faculty and student remains the bedrock for assisting students in trouble.

The tragedy at Virginia Tech—exactly three years ago as I write this essay—provided insight into our students and ourselves that guides my perspective. In the end, thirty-two faculty members and students were killed and a number wounded. Three of the dead and one of the wounded were in honors. One of the deceased as well as the wounded student resided in Main Campbell Honors House. The honors staff spent the day seeking information about our students and being available for those who needed to talk or simply be with others. We paid particular attention to Main Campbell, and Terry Papillon—then Preceptor to Main Campbell and now Director of Honors—sat with students late into the night. The students in Hillcrest Honors House prepared food and visited Main Campbell to offer solace. Mostly students needed to know that they were safe and to cry in the company of others who felt their fear and pain.

Members of the honors staff spent hours with students who were having extreme difficulties coping with the complete disruption of campus life. Students dealt not only with the loss of friends but the closing of the university. They were given the option of ending the semester the following week, yet attendance in classes remained significant. I learned a lot about community and about confronting troubles during this time. When given leeway to leave the campus the week of the shootings, many students remained. One young woman who chose to stay explained, “The faculty needs us.”

Vigils were held, and students from universities far and near came to be with us. A poster appeared with drawings of all the mascots in the Atlantic Coast Conference huddled around the Hokie Bird. The logo simply said: “We are all Hokies today.” Heidi Miller, who was wounded, returned in the fall, and she proved an inspiration to faculty and students alike. The crisis faced by the community became, in fact, thousands of personal events where we could draw strength from one another.

Rather than forget, we are constantly reminded of the events of that horrible day. The following spring semester we lost a student in an automobile accident. She had been in the process of joining Hillcrest Honors House, and Main Campbell students brought food and solace, repaying Hillcrest—too soon—for past kindnesses. We then lost yet another student to illness. What I have learned is that being there to help students when they face trouble begins and continues as the very core of honors for both faculty and students.

We live at a difficult moment in history. The economic, social, and political world is in disarray. State support for education is falling dramatically, and tuition is climbing. Faculty and students alike share a sense of unease as academic departments are rearranged and academic programs altered. Such an environment intensifies the number and difficulty of the troubles with which students must contend.

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At honors staff meetings each week, at least part of the time always involves discussion of particular problems faced by students. In recent times, the problems follow a particular and familiar pattern:

- A student's parent lost his or her job and can no longer afford to support the student's education.
- Two roommates in an Honors house cannot resolve the problems of living in the same room.
- A parent has threatened to cut support unless the student achieves a grade average considerably above Honors requirements.
- A suicidal student proves disruptive to several people on the same hallway.
- A student has problems meeting the requirements of a scholarship.
- A student seeks advice on changing academic programs.

In each case one or more of the staff, working as colleagues, explore the various alternatives to solve these and other problems. As important as resolving the problem is the sense of working together. Often the manifestations of stress—the angers, fears, and frustrations—subside when the student has calm help in seeking a reasonable solution.

Given the current climate of the country with divisions making rational discourse impossible, teaching civility and collegiality in troubled times seems an especially important part of the responsibility of university honors. Our students, along with us, need to learn that anger at the cause of a trouble must be replaced by our intellectual prowess in trying to set the world right. If we succeed, then the ideals of justice, fairness, and respect will relegate the raucous and sometimes demeaning debate to inconsequence. To fail is to invite the further decline of civilized discourse and to create an even more troubled and violent world for our future students.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The honors staff at Virginia Tech assisted with this paper. They are: Terry Papillon, Director; Christina McIntyre, Associate Director; Russell Shrader, Assistant Director; Michael Blackwell, Assistant Director; Dan Thorp, Preceptor, Hillcrest House; Patricia Amateis, Preceptor, Main Campbell House; Michelle Wooddell, Office Manager; Tammy Guynn, Secretary Honors, Pre-Med. All were on campus April 16, 2007.

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