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Editor’s introduction

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Since its inception over fifty years ago, the National Collegiate Honors Council has served as an oasis of civility and cooperation in times of academic, cultural, and political turmoil. The presidential speeches and other official remarks at annual conferences echo this fact year after year, not as mere self-congratulation or boosterism but as evidence that even as generations of honors faculty and administrators have worked hard to maintain this tradition within the NCHC, it continues to surprise the old-timers as well as those who are new to the organization. Since honors educators have or have had positions in academic departments and in disciplinary organizations where contention is perpetual on matters both weighty and trivial, the novelty never quite wears off of finding oneself among a group of colleagues who earnestly seek better ways to educate their students as well as make education exciting and honorable throughout the country and beyond. In celebration of this tradition, we begin the 2019 issue of Honors in Practice with the 2018 presidential address and three sets of remarks by the year’s award winners.

In her “Presidential Speech,” Naomi Yavneh Klos of Loyola University New Orleans begins by praising the diversity of honors institutions, disciplines, missions, and students. Having acknowledged this shared commitment to diversity, she goes on to describe what she sees as shortcomings in policies and practices that limit the racial, cultural, economic, and social diversity within many honors programs. Increasing diversity has been the primary focus of Yavneh Klos’s presidency as well as a longtime but never fully successful focus of the NCHC. What distinguishes her critical approach to this subject is that she couches it within her sense of a unified community with a shared sense of purpose, intent on self-examination and self-correction. She locates her argument within a personal narrative that signals trust and respect, rather than contention, in addressing a serious problem.

In her “Founders Award Remarks,” Joan Digby of LIU Post focuses on the living tradition of personal relationships and influences within the NCHC. “Only in NCHC,” she says, “did I find a warm group of academic colleagues without hierarchy or competition.” She evokes the previous winners of the Founders Award as inspirations for her remaining committed to honors and to NCHC for four decades, locating herself and her award in the long tradition of personal connections within the organization. She highlights the power
of this tradition when she honors other award recipients: “Acknowledging current leaders with awards named for [NCHC’s] legendary figures—John Zubizarreta for the Sam Schuman Award and Eddie Weller for the Ron Brandolini Award—honors our history, present, and future.”

One of the award winners, Eddie Weller, illustrates Digby’s point about honoring “our history, present, and future” by focusing his acceptance remarks on the influence that Ron Brandolini had on him and on his development of an honors program at San Jacinto College. He recounts his first meeting with the namesake of his award and the subsequent warmth and collegiality that Brandolini granted him in the ensuing years. Weller describes his commitment to carrying on this tradition by helping others as he was helped.

The other award winner, John Zubizarreta of Columbia College, brings home the personal power of this tradition in a letter addressed directly to Sam Schuman, for whom his award is named. Schuman is a legendary figure whose death in 2014 did not diminish the enormity of his presence in NCHC as an inspiration to all who knew him and, secondhand, by all who did not. Zubizarreta’s letter expresses the personal, professional, cultural, and emotional force of Schuman’s ongoing guidance of the organization toward his ethical ideal of civility and toward his ideal of honors education, which John Z. quotes at the end of his letter: “Teachers need to love their subject matter, and they need to love their students, and they need to love bringing them together.”

Contributors to Honors in Practice advance Sam Schuman’s ideal in the various ways that they suggest improving our understanding and practice of honors education with the ultimate goal of better serving our students. The first formal essay in this volume cites Schuman as the source of the authors’ “characterization of honors education as, at its best, engaged, imaginative, and socially conscious.” In “Honors Work: Seeing Gaps, Combining Gifts, Focusing on Wider Human Needs,” Mimi Killinger, Maddy Jackson, and Samantha Saucier describe bringing Canadian activist Leigh Boyle’s “Lipstick Project” to the University of Maine. Based on her experiences in Northern Ethiopia, where she provided “humane and beautifying care” to women with obstetric fistula, Boyle brought the same care to hospice patients in her native Vancouver. Inspired by her story, Killinger and her honors students invited Boyle to UMaine. They reached out to other honors students, Orono high school students, and numerous departments and organizations on campus to sponsor events featuring Boyle and her story, in the process bridging gaps between diverse group on campus and in the community. “Together honors students,
high school students, and honors faculty made real-world connections and worked toward cultivating empathetic, engaged citizens.”

The next essay also focuses on social justice and helping honors students learn how to understand and redress injustices in the world around them. One method of reaching this goal was the theme of the 2018 NCHC conference: “Learning to Transgress.” Richard Holt of Northern Illinois University addresses this goal and theme in “Forever Home: A Multilevel Approach to Fostering Productive Transgression in Honors.” He describes a course he taught at the University at Albany where he had students offer assistance to pet adoption agencies in finding “forever homes” for their animals. In the course, he adopted three main ideas: (1) process over product; (2) instructor deference to students in deciding what and how to learn; and (3) experiential learning strategies transgressing traditional practices. Holt describes the unexpected twists and transgressive turns that occurred in the class, and he explains the transgressive value of what he calls the THERE model—“T eacher as Outlaw; H onors Courses Fit; E xpand Problem Space; R eveal ZOPED (zone of proximal development); E ngage Real World.”

One goal that is directly related to social justice and that the NCHC has addressed frequently in the past and present, including Yavneh Klos’s presidential address, is increasing the diversity of honors programs, with a predominant focus on including more underrepresented minorities, especially more African American students, in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). In “Opening Doors to Engage a More Diverse Population in Honors: A Conversation,” Giovanna E. Walters, Angela Jill Cooley, and Quentina Dunbar present a conversation about how they hope to achieve this goal at Minnesota State University, Mankato. The three authors—a staff member, teacher, and student in the program—exchange ideas about the best ways to break down the real and imagined barriers that discourage eligible minority students from participating in honors. What they discover together echoes many of the points made by Yavneh Klos during her presidency: a holistic admissions process; cross-listed courses that mix honors with non-honors students; emphasis on social justice issues; creation of a minority advocacy group; and campus partnerships.

Another approach to increasing diversity is accommodating the diverse needs of students. In “‘Connecting Honors for All’: Reimagining the Two-Year Honors Program in the Age of Guided Pathways,” Charlotte Pressler describes the new ways that the honors program at South Florida State College (SFSC) is creating options for students whose primary interests are
vocational. The traditional liberal arts curriculum that is typical in honors excludes many career-oriented students who cannot fit such courses into their curriculum. Adopting a model based on the way honors is conducted at technical universities in The Netherlands, the honors program at SFSC now offers “project-based, faculty-guided opportunities for undergraduate research” in general education courses. Pressler describes the evolution of this new approach to honors at her two-year college and offers it as a viable model for other such colleges in the United States.

The next essay offers a model for teaching science and religion. Honors faculty who have focused on the often fraught connections between these two topics will understand the challenges of teaching such a course, the same challenges that arise in our politics and culture. Joseph W. Shane describes a course he teaches at Shippensburg University in an essay titled “An Evolving Interdisciplinary Honors Seminar on Science and Religion” that will no doubt interest faculty who have struggled with this topic. Shane contends that the subject is ideal for honors because it “requires elements of philosophy, theology, and comparative religion in addition to history and to working understandings of contemporary natural and social sciences.” He describes the background, structure, and content of the course, including a syllabus and concluding with suggestions to honors faculty who want to take on this challenging topic.

A different kind of challenge has been undertaken by Joan Navarre, Maddie Kayser, and Dylan Pass of University of Wisconsin-Stout (UW-Stout) and Marilyn Bisch, Catherine Smith, and Andrew Williamson of Indiana State University (ISU). In “Crossing Campus Boundaries: Using Classical Mythology and Digital Storytelling to Connect Honors Colleges,” they describe a collaborative course they designed that creates a “cross-institutional collaboration blurring the boundaries between campuses.” This unique collaboration involved mutual readings of Classical mythology at both campuses, with students at UW-Stout making short videos of the myths and students at ISU serving as consultants and critics of the films. The films were shown at ISU’s Spring Classics Fest and at UW-Stout’s 4:51 Short Film Festival and Exhibition. The honors students at both universities valued “the unique nature of working with students they did not and could not personally know, challenging them to develop new ways to provide honest evaluation and constructive feedback that was critical, useful, and respectful of multiple, unfamiliar perspectives.” The authors suggest that programs can easily incorporate this kind of collaboration with honors at another institution.
The final essay in this volume provides advice on how best to present such suggestions in honors publications. In “Publishing in Honors: Advice from Reviewers of HIP and JNCHC,” Heather Camp of Minnesota State University, Mankato, presents the results of her survey of reviewers for both Honors in Practice and Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council on the most successful ways to write for these journals. Using a theoretical framework developed by Carole Palmer of the University of Washington’s Information School, Camp organizes the advice from fourteen journal reviewers under two primary headings, exploration and translation, and she then summarizes the character traits of successful journal contributors: enthusiasm, foresight, honesty, and polish. Along the way, she cites detailed advice from individual journal reviewers that potential contributors should find useful. Along the way, she reveals the collegiality and dedication of journal reviewers in helping other honors educators accomplish and communicate their best work on behalf of their students.