Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council

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**Forum Articles**

- My Objections to Outcome (Note the Singular) Assessment
  Joan Digby

- An Effective Honors Composition Class Improves Honors Retention Rates: Outcomes and Statistical Prestidigitation
  Annmarie Guzy

- Learning Outcomes Assessment Misunderstood: Glass Half-Empty or Half-Full
  Beata M. Jones and Catherine M. Wehlburg

- On Assessment, Imagination, and Agency: Using Rubrics to Inform and Negotiate the Honors Experience
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- Collaborative Design: Building Task-Specific Rubrics in the Honors Classroom
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**Research Essays**

- Using Iceland as a Model for Interdisciplinary Honors Study
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- Generative Intersections: Supporting Honors through College Composition
  Heather C. Camp

- Honors and the Completion Agenda: Identifying and Duplicating Student Success
  Jay Trucker

- Why Honors is a Hard Sell in the Community College
  Deborah Engelen-Eigles and Janice Levinsohn Milner

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The National Collegiate Honors Council is an association of faculty, students, and others interested in honors education.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

The next issue of *JNCHC* (**deadline: March 1, 2015**) invites research essays on any topic of interest to the honors community.

The issue will also include a Forum focused on the theme “Honors and the Future of the Humanities.” We invite essays of roughly 1000–2000 words that consider this theme in a practical and/or theoretical context.

The lead essay for the Forum, which is available on the NCHC website <http://nchc-honors.org/jnchc-lead-essay-the-humanities-are-dead-long-live-the-humanities>, is by Larry Andrews of Kent State University. His essay—titled “The Humanities Are Dead! Long Live the Humanities!”—signals both bad and good omens for the humanities in a culture where they are often pronounced to be dying. Andrews then describes the deep connections of honors to the humanities in its history, values, and purpose.

Contributions to the Forum may—but need not—respond to Andrews’s essay.

Questions that Forum contributors might consider include: Is the connection of honors to the humanities essential to its basic nature? Is it possible to imagine—or desire—an honors education that is not heavily reliant on the humanities? Would the downfall of the humanities spell the downfall of honors? What changes, if any, need to be made in honors education to secure its future within the current climate? Should honors detach itself from the humanities and, if so, how? Are current data-driven trends in honors education, such as rubrics and outcomes assessment, a move away from the humanities and toward the social sciences, and are these trends beneficial or perilous to honors? Are the humanities a luxury of the past while vocationalism and speed-learning are harbingers of the future, and should honors educators fight or accept a future-oriented stance? Will the humanities become the purview of the privileged while the 99% move further toward technical education, and, if so, what will this mean for the diversity and quality of honors education? Does its connection to the humanities bolster the notion that honors is elitist? Is the critical thinking engendered by honors and the humanities a benefit or a threat to democracy? Is a political agenda at work in the current assault on or neglect of the humanities, and does this agenda imperil honors education as well?

Forum essays should focus on ideas, concepts, and/or opinions related to “Honors and the Future of the Humanities.” Examples from one’s own campus can be and usually are relevant, but essays should not simply be descriptions of “what we do at our institution.”

Please send all submissions to Ada Long at adalong@uab.edu.
EDITORIAL POLICY

*Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* is a refereed periodical publishing scholarly articles on honors education. The journal uses a double-blind peer review process. Articles may include analyses of trends in teaching methodology, articles on interdisciplinary efforts, discussions of problems common to honors programs, items on the national higher education agenda, and presentations of emergent issues relevant to honors education. Submissions and inquiries should be directed to Ada Long at adalong@uab.edu.

DEADLINES

March 1 (for spring/summer issue); September 1 (for fall/winter issue)

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

We accept material by email attachment in Word (not pdf). We do not accept material by fax or hard copy.

The documentation style can be whatever is appropriate to the author’s primary discipline or approach (MLA, APA, etc.), but please avoid footnotes. Internal citation to a list of references (bibliography) is strongly preferred, and the editor will revise all internal citations in accordance with MLA guidelines.

There are no minimum or maximum length requirements; the length should be dictated by the topic and its most effective presentation.

Accepted essays are edited for grammatical and typographical errors and for infelic平ies of style or presentation. Authors have ample opportunity to review and approve edited manuscripts before publication.

Submissions and inquiries should be directed to Ada Long at adalong@uab.edu or, if necessary, 850.927.3776.
Ann Raia is Professor Emerita of Modern and Classical Languages at the College of New Rochelle, where she has been on the faculty since 1964. Ann has devoted her seemingly endless energy both to her discipline of classical studies and, fortunately for the NCHC, to honors education at the local, regional and national levels. In addition to presenting numerous papers and workshops, she has published articles, translations, and reviews in her academic discipline and has contributed numerous publications in honors, including chapters in the NCHC monographs *Place as Text: Approaches to Active Learning* and *Writing on Your Feet: Reflective Practices in City as Text™*. She has won major awards and grants in both classics and honors, the most recent being her selection as an NCHC Fellow in 2013.

Ann’s influence on honors education began on her own campus, where she was founding director of the honors program from 1974 to 1983 and from 1986 to 2001. In the Northeast Region of the NCHC, she held the full range of offices, including president in 1981–82, and was founding editor of the regional newsletter. She has provided national service to honors in many ways and venues—as a member of the Executive Committee, as a consultant to some eighteen or more honors programs around the country, and as chair.
or member of various NCHC committees—with two of her most prominent realms of influence being the Small College Honors Programs Committee and the Honors Semesters Committee. Within the context of the latter, Ann has directed two Honors Semesters, one at LIU Brooklyn and the other at her home campus, and has served as facilitator and evaluator for many more.

Ann’s gentle authority and seriousness of purpose have bolstered the dignity, heart, and integrity of the NCHC for some thirty-five years, and we are pleased to honor her and her many contributions to honors education.
EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION
Ada Long
University of Alabama at Birmingham

Faculty new to higher education have entered a world already circumscribed by assessment practices that may seem normal and transparent, but the increasing impacts of these practices have redefined the content as well as contours of teaching and learning in the three or more decades since they started to take hold. Administrations, boards of trustees, accrediting agencies, and legislatures have insisted on accountability without necessarily having experience in what is being accounted for and have fostered a distrust of faculty members as the authorities on their own practices. As a result, higher education has been undergoing the kind of cultural upheaval that took place in elementary and secondary education more than fifty years ago.

Honors programs may have been slower than most academic units to feel the impacts of the accountability movement since they have traditionally carved out their own space for innovation, personal attention, original research, sense of community, and liberal-arts culture within the larger institution, but assessment has come to honors in a big way during the past decade and is now virtually universal in honors programs and colleges. Honors administrators have often tried to take control of the process by developing their own assessment systems—sometimes successfully, sometimes not. In either case, discussions of assessment in honors now tend to focus on the best ways to do it, not on whether it should be done or how it is changing the climate of honors, so it is important to ask these basic questions, and Joan Digby, who has seen it all, both asks and answers.

Digby leads off the JNCHC Forum on “Rubrics, Templates, and Measurable Outcomes in Honors” with her essay “My Objections to Outcome [Note the Singular] Assessment.” A Call for Papers went out on the NCHC website and listserv and in the NCHC E-Newsletter, inviting members to contribute to the Forum. The Call included a list of questions that Forum contributors might consider:

Have rubrics and templates made teaching in honors easier or harder? What is the purpose of rubrics (or templates or both)? Whom do they benefit and how? What does a teacher’s use of rubrics imply about his or her image of students? What does it imply about a teacher’s philosophy of learning? Are rubrics and templates inherently inconsistent with creativity? Under what circumstances are rubrics
(or templates) appropriate and effective in honors education? Do rubrics help students understand what a teacher expects of them, and is this understanding an asset or detriment to good education? What cultural, social, and/or educational trend(s) gave rise to the use of rubrics, templates, and/or quantitative outcomes assessment? Have rubrics and templates improved the quality of honors education, and how? Given the requirements that legislatures, administrations, and the public have made for accountability of academic programs, what are the alternatives to quantifiable data? Is there a generation gap (or a gender gap) among teachers in attitudes about rubrics and templates and measurable outcomes?

The Forum includes four responses to the Call for Papers in addition to Digby’s lead essay. To one degree or other, all the responses take issue with Digby and defend measurable outcomes and rubrics.

In both style and content, Digby’s essay represents the passion, creativity, and intelligence that we associate with honors, spiced up with humor and a dash of vitriol. With the “tools” of etymology, history, literature, and common sense, she does battle against the tools of rubrics, templates, and measurable outcomes, decrying the reductive, fill-in-the-boxes nature of assessment whereby students become quantifiable data rather than original thinkers. Digby argues that “if we don’t defend the virtues of imagination and spontaneity in our classes, we will all be teaching from rigid syllabi according to rubrics and templates spelled out week by week as teachers of fifth-grade classes are forced to do.” Her essay is a call to action against the “absurdly regimented, generally fictitious, and misnamed goals and objectives” that kill inspiration and turn education into busywork.

Annmarie Guzy begins and ends her response to Digby’s essay with her confession that she measures outcomes and that she might be like Digby’s young colleagues at LIU Post: “rather than shouting from the parapet against measurable outcomes, I acknowledge with a grumble, a sigh, and a rolling of my eyes that number-crunching is a permanent part of today’s academia.” In “An Effective Honors Composition Class Improves Honors Retention Rates: Outcomes and Statistical Prestidigitation,” she describes the usefulness of some kinds of data collection, such as the graduation rates of her former honors composition students at the University of South Alabama; at the same time, she objects to the use of such data to dictate teaching methods or to standardize course content. Numbers are useful but also potentially
dangerous, and they are not a substitute for thoughtful discussion and analysis of what is effective in the classroom.

While Guzy offers a highly qualified and restricted defense of objective measurements, Beata Jones and Catherine Wehlburg of Texas Christian University are enthusiastic and unqualified advocates of rubrics and assessment in their essay “Learning Outcomes Assessment Misunderstood: Glass Half-Empty or Half-Full.” They argue that learning outcomes and ways to measure progress toward them are essential to good teaching; otherwise, they write, we cannot know if students are learning what we want them to learn or even know what it is that we want them to learn. In support of outcomes assessment as a valuable educational tool, they provide a long list of its advantages to teaching and learning in honors. They compare the responses of resistant faculty to the stages of grief over death or loss, contending that the time has come for acceptance because outcomes assessment is both inevitable and desirable.

Like Jones and Wehlberg, Giovanna Walters of Minnesota State University, Mankato, defends the use of rubrics as important to good teaching in her essay “On Assessment, Imagination, and Agency: Using Rubrics to Inform and Negotiate the Honors Experience.” Walters argues that the design of rubrics is, in itself, an act of creativity when it produces “a working, fluid, and negotiable document that allows students to pursue success in a variety of ways; it should state what students need to accomplish without being prescriptive in how they get to that point.” She further argues that teachers, like students, cannot know if they are successful in meeting their goals if they do not know in advance what their goals are. Rubrics provide a means to define the goals and measure success, ensuring accountability in a way that provides necessary guidance to teachers as well as students.

We conclude the Forum on “Rubrics, Templates, and Measurable Outcomes in Honors” with an interesting suggestion of how to reconcile rubrics with student-centered learning and empowerment. In “Collaborative Design: Building Task-Specific Rubrics in the Honors Classroom,” Ce Rosenow describes an innovative strategy she uses at Lane Community College for blending rubrics with creativity. In her capstone honors seminar, the students design the rubrics themselves, collaborating with each other to develop the criteria by which they will be assessed, making them part of the assessment process rather than the targets of it. While Digby describes rubrics as a means “to measure students based on preconceived expectations,” if the students themselves establish the expectations, then rubrics can become a space for
critical thinking, creativity, and active learning. Rosenow offers specific and useful ideas about how to incorporate her collaborative approach to rubrics into various components of an honors seminar, including a final symposium.

An analogy to foreign travel arises from the essays in this Forum. Digby advocates unscheduled travel in which the voyager has a sense of the territory but chooses to wait and discover what there is to find. In contrast, most of the responders use rubrics and measurements as a kind of preset itinerary to make sure that they arrive on time at the places they have decided to find.

The first research essay in this JNCHC issue is “Using Iceland as a Model for Interdisciplinary Honors Study” by Kim Andersen and Gary Thorgaard, who advocate a holistic approach to honors-level study: “Interdisciplinary teaching always focuses on disciplines as well as the connections between them, the ‘disciplinary’ being balanced by the ‘inter.’ What is sought is another consciousness, a practical understanding liberated from disciplinary perspectives.” They offer the example of an upper-division course on Iceland they have taught in the Washington State University Honors College. In this course, Andersen’s research background in Icelandic sagas and Thorgaard’s in the genetics of fish broadened into a focus on “culture, environment, genetics, and economics.” Along with a reflection on the nature and value of interdisciplinary study, the authors have provided a model for a place-based, interdisciplinary honors course and a fascinating analysis of the bridge between Iceland’s past and present.

In “Generative Intersections: Supporting Honors through College Composition,” Heather C. Camp of Minnesota State University, Mankato, provides arguments in favor of maintaining first-year composition as a key component of honors education. She notes that the increase in Advanced Placement courses and dual-enrollment programs has led to the gradual displacement of first-year composition in honors programs, a trend that has diminished the quality of education we offer our students and worked to the detriment of their future success. She suggests that three recent developments in the field of writing studies should make first-year composition more valuable to honors programs than in the past: “the field's increased attentiveness to reading as an area of emphasis, its growing interest in metacognition and learning transfer, and its potential for facilitating digital engagement.” Honors administrators who have allowed composition to atrophy within their curriculum would do well to take another look at the value of first-year honors composition.

The final two essays in this issue of JNCHC focus on honors education at community colleges, starting with “Honors and the Completion Agenda:
Identifying and Duplicating Student Success” by Jay Trucker of the Community College of Baltimore County, Dundalk Campus. Having noticed that “many of today’s honors success stories at CCBC were yesterday’s dropouts and underachievers,” Trucker designed a research project that, after tracking the success of developmental students in honors at all the campuses of CCBC, recommended strategies for recruiting for honors from that population of students. He argues that honors can help developmental students succeed in college, provide the advantage of honors to a larger population of potentially strong students, boost the size of the honors program, increase the program’s diversity, and improve the transfer and graduation rates of the institution. Based on his research, Trucker suggests that honors programs in two-year and/or open-admissions colleges would benefit from “partnering with developmental education and college orientation programs, institutionalizing the solicitation of honors recommendations, and enlisting honors program students to serve as unofficial travel guides.”

Finally, in “Why Honors is a Hard Sell in the Community College,” Deborah Engelen-Eigles and Janice Levinsohn Milner of Century College echo some of the themes in Jay Trucker’s research. The authors address the seeming contradiction between the academic focus of honors and the current tendency to define the role of community colleges as job-training for low-level employment. They suggest a subversive role for honors programs at community colleges given their potential to disrupt the social, racial, and intellectual stratification that starts in grade school and hardens in the implicit tracking that takes place in college options. Honors programs can address and rectify the often false assumptions by and about students at two-year colleges.
When my goddaughter was eight years old, she was permitted to come from London to New York for a two-week visit. Elanor was precocious and had been asking when she could make this trip from the time she was four. When eight arrived, she was packed and ready. I had never had children, so living with an eight-year-old was an intense experience. What she mainly wanted to do was solve Rubik’s Cube in five minutes flat. When that didn’t happen, she erupted into a volcano of screams and tears. Eventually she figured out how to solve the puzzle and brought her completion time down to about three minutes.

If Ernő Rubik were naming his puzzle today, he would probably go for the pun and call it Rubric’s Cube since rubrics are all people talk about now in education. Remember when the word “paradigm” appeared in every high-toned article? Well, it has been replaced by “rubric.” Here a rubric, there a rubric, everywhere a rubric rubric. . . . Old MacDonald had several, and they all add up to little boxes far less colorful and ingenious than Rubik’s Cube.
I'm betting that most of the people who use the word “rubric” know very little about its meaning or history. Rubric means red ochre—red earth—as in Bryce Canyon and Sedona. Red headers were used in medieval manuscripts as section or chapter markers, and you can bet that the Whore of Babylon got herself some fancy rubrics over the years. Through most of its history, the word has been attached to religious texts and liturgy; rubrics were used as direction indicators for conducting divine services. In a system that separates church and state, it’s a wonder that the word has achieved so universal a secular makeover. Now it’s just a fancy word for a scoring grid. Think boxes! Wouldn’t they look sweet colored in red?

For decades I have been involved in university honors education. The essence of the honors approach is, dare I say, teaching “outside the box.” Everyone knows that you can’t put round ideas into square boxes, everyone except the people who do “outcomes assessment,” the pervasive vogue in filling in squares with useless information. Here, for example, is the classic definition of “rubric” as spelled out by the authors of a terrifying little handbook designed to help people who are still awake at three in the morning looking to speed up grading papers: “At its most basic, a rubric is a scoring tool that lays out the specific expectations for an assignment” (Stevens and Levi 3). There it is, a “tool” to measure “specific expectations,” and those are precisely what we do not want to elicit from students, especially in honors but to my mind across the university.

My goal is not to score or measure students against preconceived expectations but to encourage the unexpected, the breakthrough response that is utterly new, different, and thus exciting—such as a recent student analysis of Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener” in light of the “Occupy Wall Street” movement, an approach that made me rethink the story altogether. The operative word here is “think.” Students attend college, in part, to learn how to think, and we help them engage deeply in “critical thinking.” Wouldn’t it then be hypocritical to take their thoughtful reflections and score them like mindless robots, circling or checking little boxes? Sure it would. That is why, whenever I hear anyone suggest using a “rubric” to grade an essay, I want to let out the bloodcurdling (appropriately red image) scream of an eight-year-old. I’m practicing. I can do it.

What I can’t and won’t do is fill in the little boxes. My field is literature—that is, thought and sensibility expressed in words. My field encourages the subjective, anecdotal, oddly shaped experiences that constitute creative
writing. I can tell you a thousand stories about my students, how and what
they learn and what will be the outcome of their education. I know their out-
come (the plural is ugly) because I write to them for years after they leave
school. Many are now my colleagues on campus and my friends all over the
world. I can tell you their stories, but I can’t and won’t fill in boxes pretend-
ing that these will turn into measurable data. If my colleagues want to do the
boxes, I won’t object, but “I’d prefer not to.”

Nor will I read portfolios and brood on what can be gathered about the
student writers. English teachers read papers for a living. We assess them,
write useful comments, and then return them graded to the students so that
they can revise. Doing this is in our blood. For what reason would we dive
into a pile of papers on which we are prohibited from writing comments for
the sake of producing statistics that don’t even go back to the authors? All
writers need suggestions and corrections. If we are not reading papers with
the express purpose of providing the students with constructive help, then
the act of reading is a waste of time.

I regret to acknowledge that the language and fake measuring tools of the
data crunchers have infected even my own department, which now has been
coerced into producing lists of goals and objectives with such chalk-grating
phrases as “students will use writing as a meaning-making tool” and “gener-
ate an interpretation of literature . . .” Not only the mechanistic language of
the document but the fascistic insistence that students “will do” this or that
strikes me as an utterly dystopian vision of a university education.

At the very least, English departments everywhere should be the ones to
point out that goals and objectives are synonyms and that what the assess-
ment folks really mean are goals and strategies for achieving them. But “goals
and objectives” has become a cant phrase at the core of the outcomes ritual,
and I’m afraid there is nothing much we can do to change that.

Whoever came up with the phrase “outcomes assessment” probably has
no idea how a liberal education works. We teach, students learn, and, if we
are lucky, students reciprocally teach us something in a symbiotic relation-
ship that does not require external administration. It works like this: students
attend classes, read, write, engage in labs and other learning activities, pass
their courses, even do well, and in time graduate. Faculty enjoy teaching and
feel rewarded by the successes of their students. Bingo. That’s it. Nothing
more to say or prove. No boxes to fill in. Anyone with an urge to produce data
can take attendance at Commencement.
Other horrors have bubbled up to pollute the waters of our Pierian Spring. In addition to rubrics, we now have templates for everything we do. A template is essentially a mold that lets us replicate a structure. In different industries it means a gauge or guide, a horizontal beam functioning to distribute weight, or a wedge used to support a ship’s keel. You can find out more at students’ new best friend, <http://www.dictionary.com>. Yet nowhere in this most accessible word hoard is there a specifically academic meaning for “template,” a word that must come up at least once in every academic meeting. The template craze implies that everything we do can and must be measured to fit a certain mold. Not only the word but the increasing use of templates in the university reveal the degree to which academia has become an industrial operation.

In fact, we don’t need templates any more than we need rubrics. They come from the same family of low-level ideas responsible for the mechanical modes of teaching that I reject. If I were a medievalist, I would write an allegorical morality play, an updated version of *The Castle of Perseverance*, in which virtuous Professors battle vicious Rubrics and Templates, winning the day by driving them off with Open Books—I concede, maybe Digital Books!

University education, what’s left of it, is at a decisive crossroad that requires us to take a stand against the models that administrations and consultants and accrediting agencies are forcing on us. The liberal arts and sciences are under serious attack, and, if we don’t defend the virtues of imagination and spontaneity in our classes, we will all be teaching from rigid syllabi according to rubrics and templates spelled out week by week as teachers of fifth-grade classes are forced to do.

It so happens that my grandmother, born in 1887, was a fifth-grade teacher. Every Sunday evening she sat at the kitchen table filling out hour-by-hour syllabi for the week to come. I remember a book with little cards, like the library cards we used to tuck into book pockets. No pun intended, but her last name was Tuck. Even then my grandmother resented the mechanical nature of her obligation, calling it with utter contempt “busy work.”

Part of what convinced me to go into college teaching was the desire to avoid busy work and to teach what I was trained to do without people peering over my shoulder or making me fill out needless forms. Throughout my career I have given students general reading lists, telling them that we will get through as many of the works as our discussions allow, eliminate some and add others if our interests take us in different directions. I always say, “There
are no literature police to come and check on whether we have read exactly what is printed on this paper.”

But now the literature police have arrived. More and more there is pressure to write a syllabus and stick to it so as to meet absurdly regimented, generally fictitious, and misnamed goals and objectives. This is no way to run a university course and is instead the surest way to drive inspiration out of university teaching and learning.

Tragically, the university is rapidly becoming fifth grade. The terminology that has seeped into university teaching from the lower grades has, to my great horror, also mated with business so that the demons we are now facing believe that we will do as we are told by top-down management so that we attract students, bring in tuition dollars, increase endowments, and pass Go with our regional accreditation bodies. If this sounds like a board game, it is—or perhaps a computer game since everything seems to be played out in distance learning, distance teaching, anything but face-to-face, open-ended, free-form discussion and debate. This pernicious trend has made me one Angry Bird!

Around the campus I see that my young colleagues are running scared. They are afraid that they won’t get tenure and that tenure itself will soon disappear. They are afraid that their small department will be absorbed by another, bigger one. They are afraid that their classes will be cancelled and they will ultimately lose their jobs. We are not in familiar territory because all of the power and control have been misappropriated by business operatives calling for outcomes. We need to remind them that a university—and especially an honors program—is in essence a faculty teaching students. Administrators are hired hands secondary to this endeavor. Moreover, only one outcome is important: students graduate and go into the world to become the next generation of educated people. We need to clear all the rubrics and templates out of the way so that we can teach and they can learn.

To my mind there is nothing but folly in searching for “measurable outcomes”; this is a quest as doomed as searching for the meaning of life. Those who remember Monty Python will get the idea and imagine the Knights Templates dressed up in rubric baldrics, entertaining us with a jolly good “Outcomes Assessment Joust.”
REFERENCE


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An Effective Honors Composition Class Improves Honors Retention Rates: Outcomes and Statistical Prestiditigation

Annmarie Guzy
University of South Alabama

In her essay “My Objections to Outcome [Note the Singular] Assessment,” Joan Digby rails against the rubrics and templates of outcomes assessment that have pervaded contemporary higher education, arguing that faculty “enjoy teaching and feel rewarded by the successes of their students. Bingo. That’s it. Nothing more to say or prove. No boxes to fill in. Anyone with an urge to produce data can take attendance at Commencement.” I must confess that I do just that with the students who have taken my honors freshman composition courses. At the end of each spring semester, our honors program holds an Honors Senior Showcase on the day before commencement. Each graduating honors senior presents his or her thesis work, most in poster form but a few in brief oral presentations, and then each student is recognized in a hooding ceremony. Family, friends, faculty, and administrators are invited to celebrate the students’ accomplishments, and I am always curious to see how many of my honors composition students have navigated through four years
or more of their major coursework, honors requirements, and thesis projects to graduate from the program.

At the spring 2014 showcase, I was particularly pleased with the results. In fall 2010, approximately 45 freshmen were admitted to the honors program, and 12 of these students graduated from the program in spring 2014, a four-year completion rate of approximately 27%. Eight of those incoming freshmen were enrolled in my fall 2010 honors composition course, and six of those eight students graduated from the honors program, a 75% retention rate from my class. Although I only taught approximately 18% of the incoming freshmen, I helped to produce 50% of the graduating seniors.

I can hear my colleagues in the social sciences howling at my overly simplistic numerical “outcomes assessment.” To start, the sample size was too small, and the data were collected from only one year. Expanding this assessment longitudinally, I have kept an annual tally of my honors composition graduates since the program’s inception in 1999. From fall 1999 through fall 2010, which was the most recent freshman class to have reached the four-year graduation mark, I taught 122 students across 10 sections of honors composition. Of those students, 72 graduated from honors, meaning that 59% of the students who took my honors composition course completed the honors program. According to my estimates of incoming freshman class sizes, which have grown from around 25 in fall 1999 to 63 in fall 2014, the overall program graduation rate is approximately 45%. Our program does not have current statistics on graduation rates, but the director believes that we are closer to 50–55%. In either case, my honors composition students do tend to graduate at a higher rate than the general honors population.

Granted, many more factors than just one composition course play into honors graduation rates. Students encounter various challenges in their major courses, and they work with other honors faculty in seminars and thesis research. Some transfer to other schools, some cannot maintain the required 3.5 GPA, some leave the program after achieving their desired MCAT or LSAT scores, and some admit that they never intended to complete the required thesis project but wanted the four years of scholarship money. Still, I cannot help but wonder what elements of my course might give students an edge in honors program completion. Like Digby, I am an English professor, yet my training lies in communications, rhetoric, and technical writing, so I focus assignments on discipline-specific research and argumentation from the students’ majors. This insight into modes of communication in their chosen fields might aid students in constructing and writing
more successful undergraduate research and capstone projects. Also, I focus on issues in honors education to demonstrate different types of argumentative strategies, and I supplement textbook chapters with appropriate articles from *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* and *Honors in Practice*. For instance, I use Bonnie Irwin’s “We Are the Stories We Tell” as an example of narrative argument, and we analyze Janice Szabos’ “High Achieving and Gifted Students” dichotomy during our discussion of definition arguments. Perhaps this awareness increases students’ engagement in honors education and their commitment to the program. I have incorporated these types of assignments into my course because I have found through experience that students write more effectively when they are allowed to choose subjects that interest them and they can see how they will use these skills in the future. The only writing program requirements that I must follow are that my syllabus should include five major papers and that the course should focus on academic research and argumentation; beyond that, honors composition has not been assessed through common essays, portfolio scoring, or other typical methods, so we are generally free to move outside the box as we choose.

Without the yoke of mandated assessment, I still prefer to be a reflective practitioner, so I have talked informally with students and graduates about what worked and what could have been improved in my classes. For example, I designed an assignment in which each student had a fifty-minute class period to lead a discussion of a brief, audience-appropriate article related to his or her discipline-specific research. My goals were to strengthen students’ abilities to discuss topics from any discipline and to help them practice scholarly debate. I was unprepared for the amount of resistance I encountered, such as students bringing their bibles to class when certain scientific or medical topics were to be discussed, so for the next two years I replaced the article discussions with in-class writing activities. Students later began to tell me how much they had learned from the discussion sessions, so I returned the assignment to the syllabus, albeit with a better set of guidelines for conducting academic debate. These types of changes have been spurred organically from spontaneous discussions with my students rather than by conducting formal exit interviews or relying on the quantitative course evaluations that yield data so generic as to be almost useless. The fact that I begin class on time cannot possibly represent my success as a teacher or show administrators that I am not wasting money.

When I have discussed my honors composition numerology with colleagues, I have received a variety of responses. Some of my departmental
colleagues have jokingly asked me not to broadcast the numbers because they make the professors who rotate in and out of the other honors composition sections look bad. The writing program administrator also wondered what was going on—or not going on—in the other two honors composition sections each fall semester because, if my graduation rates were higher than the program average, someone else’s necessarily had to be lower. Fortunately, this line of inquiry has not yet led down the slippery slope toward using my syllabus as one of Digby’s dreaded templates. We do not teach honors composition from a common syllabus, so professors have the freedom to teach their sections as they see fit, and many move beyond what they would normally do in a regular composition course. To be honest, I would not want my syllabus to be appropriated and forced upon someone else, especially for the sole purpose of increasing retention rates. On the other hand, only one of my colleagues has ever asked me what I do in my course, even though honors composition is the focus of my scholarly work. In fact, honors faculty in other departments have shown more interest in how I teach my course and how they can build upon what I do. Of course, they are safely removed from internal departmental politics, but they also tend to be regularly involved in the program and more focused on improving the program in its entirety.

Continuing down the standardization rabbit hole, I can imagine what would happen if my casual statistical prestidigitation were thrown into the gears of the annual goals and outcomes report machine. Into what educational management language would I be required to shoehorn my practices to ensure that they conformed with or exceeded established standards? What assessment instruments would I be required use both latitudinally and longitudinally to measure the reliability and validity of my pedagogical methods? Would I retain the freedom to adapt aspects of my syllabus to address the changing needs of different student groups, or would I have to justify changes only in terms of increasing the retention rate? Would I then be pressured to demonstrate an annual increase in said retention rate? In the end, would all of this quantitative outcomes assessment help me to be a more reflective practitioner who addresses and adapts to the needs of her students, or would I simply become a more creative statistician who massages the numbers to meet the needs of administrators? In twenty-two years of university teaching, I have sent scores for thousands of common essays, standardized exams, and graduation portfolios up the assessment pipeline, but I have almost never seen a response come back down to the teachers’ level—and I have been told that I do not want to see a response because it will come down as a mandate.
Best practices say that we should close the assessment loop by implementing change based on the results, but all I see are changes to attendance policies, reduction of credit-hour requirements, or the implementation of campus-wide midterm grade notifications in lower-level courses rather than substantive curricular change.

Perhaps I am akin to the younger professors to whom Digby refers: rather than shouting from the parapet against measurable outcomes, I acknowledge with a grumble, a sigh, and a rolling of my eyes that number-crunching is a permanent part of today’s academia. I will scan through a batch of standardized essays, hastily write down some scores, and dutifully pass them up the chain of command, knowing that the entire enterprise is probably statistically invalid but conceding that the administratosphere demands numbers, and I will continue to take attendance at the senior showcase, smiling quietly to myself and knowing, at least for now, that what I do in my class helps my honors students to graduate but that their graduation rate does not dictate what I do in my class.

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Learning Outcomes Assessment Misunderstood: Glass Half-Empty or Half-Full

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If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupery

A professor walks into a room full of honors students and begins an activity related to the assigned topic of the day. The probability that most of the students in class will enthusiastically engage is probably zero unless the professor has established the relevance of the material and somehow hooked the students with an intriguing question or example. Many students, even honors students, will view any activity as a hassle unless the professor establishes relevance and creates favorable conditions for engagement. Professors are no different when it comes to learning outcomes assessment. When asked to participate in the process, we see a glass half-empty rather than a glass half-full, so we need to start by examining why and how we might change this teaching attitude.
Teaching is a complex, multidimensional activity, requiring faculty to juggle numerous tasks and goals while staying flexible, adjusting agendas, and meeting the needs of students. As Chickering notes, teaching is “arranging the conditions for learning” (25). In honors learner-centered or learning-centered classrooms of the twenty-first century, teaching means selecting content areas, resources, pedagogy, learning experiences, and technology as well as engaging, inspiring, challenging, facilitating, coaching, mentoring, evaluating, and then doing it all over again... but better. Transformational teachers (Slavich & Zimbardo) are artists, essayists, and scientists (Finely) who orchestrate a class, take into account the recently changed profile of college students, do the research on learning, motivate students, and assess their path using informal and formal measures such as rubrics. Transformational teachers treat class “like a carefully crafted persuasive essay—with a clear purpose and unique sense of style, a memorable beginning and end, a logical sequence, important content, nimble transitions, and contagious passion. These characteristics persuade students to believe that learning the content and skills really matters” (Finley).

While we all aspire to be the transformational teachers described by Finley, all of us could benefit from taking a mirror to ourselves and re-evaluating our craft in view of student learning outcomes. Many faculty still teach courses not knowing what their expected course learning outcomes are, instead designing courses with random elements that just seem like a good idea for their students. Even more often, professors lack understanding of how the outcomes they are supposed to generate in their courses map to program or institutional outcomes that were promised to the students when they enrolled in the institution and program. Also, what students are learning in our classrooms is sometimes not what we expect them to learn, even with all the well-meaning intentions of the activities we design to meet the planned course objectives. With the escalating costs of college and with families as well as employers asking hard questions about the value of higher education, we need to know where we are going with our students and if we are getting there in our classrooms.

While the recent pressure toward accountability and proof of academic program effectiveness has been driven by legislators, accrediting agencies, and calls for more affordable higher education, the “systematic use of evaluation and assessment has been one of the core principles guiding education” for a long time (Otero & Spurrier 3). In our opinion, all in the academy should consider assessing student learning a worthwhile endeavor; however, some
faculty are not embracing the practice—a sentiment expressed in Joan Digby’s essay in this issue and bemoaned by Greg Lanier in 2008. Reasons for this rejection could be that outcome assessment is not easy or that it is an abstract, hard-to-quantify, multidisciplinary, time-intensive endeavor involving a variety of components. “Assessment is a systematic, on-going, iterative process of monitoring a program or college to determine what is being done well and what needs improvement” (Otero & Spurrier 5). Perhaps some teachers fear assessment as a punitive process with unpleasant consequences or as inconsequential busywork once completed. We may also fear that we are not teaching as well as we like to think we are and that an outcomes assessment process might show inadequacies to our colleagues and ourselves. We cannot afford, however, to feel put-upon or offended by this administrative request, or to be fearful of the process, given the realities of the world we live in.

Faculty comments about assessment often sound something like this: “Assessment? I am not sure what all this emphasis is about, but we do lots of assessment here. I grade my students, they evaluate me after each course, and every five or six years my department gets reviewed. Isn’t that enough? Why are people asking for more?” (Wolff & Harris 271). In 1969, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross introduced a series of stages that we may encounter when we are faced with death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. In many ways, the faculty response to assessment has been like grieving (Wolf and Harris). Long gone are the days when faculty could teach with no syllabus and no accountability. Because the accreditation mandate has meant that most university administrations have had to require learning outcomes assessment, many faculty are grieving what they perceive as the lack of focus on teaching, seeing “accountability” mandates as useless and bureaucratic, designed only to satisfy legislatures.

As assessment mandates continue to increase, an underlying and often unspoken assumption is that, because assessment of student learning is now required, someone thinks that faculty are not doing a good job; they must be caught, and change must happen. Looking back thirty or so years, when assessment first became mandated by accreditation, faculty often ignored the mandates, assuming they would go away like any other fad. Now, as higher education is under increasing pressure to demonstrate that students are learning and that a degree is worth the public and private costs, we are moving toward acceptance. According to Margaret Miller, “… gradually, then, higher education was coming to a more-or-less reluctant acceptance of the inevitability of assessment. But that acceptance was manifested less as a growing
interest in more sophisticated means of assessment than in a movement of faculty attention from teaching to learning” (6). There are, however, meaningful educational reasons that moving toward a culture of ongoing student-learning outcomes assessment, even in honors, will benefit the college, the university, the faculty, and present and future students.

Assessment in its simplest form is a skill, at one of the highest levels of the Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Anderson et al.) which we aspire to develop in all of our students. Many of us, though, shy away from applying this skill ourselves beyond offering assignment/exam grades. If we fail to do learning outcomes assessment in order to evaluate not just our students but ourselves and to determine the success of our entire courses and programs, all we have are the traditional measures of higher education value such as graduation rates, employment statistics, graduate school admission numbers, and student/employer/alumni satisfaction survey results. These measures do not allow us to assess what we did well in our individual courses or programs and thus prevent us from planning for the continuous course/program improvement so critical to the success of our students and institutions.

A culture of assessment and data-based decision-making can have several important consequences. The honors unit can build a shared understanding of its mission and values and of the specific learning outcomes expected of the students. In addition, the decision-making becomes more transparent so that all involved can see why decisions were made and know what data were used and how. Furthermore, decisions are based on information that is important to the college, its faculty, staff, and students since these decisions have been agreed on and are part of the culture. The information from an assessment can then be used in a variety of ways. For example, Truman State University has experienced “profound changes” as a result of institutionalizing assessment efforts (Magruder, McManis, & Young 28). The types of changes that might occur on a specific campus will vary, but, when a program or an institution seriously considers using information about what students are learning and doing, it is better prepared to meet the needs of students in an ever-changing world. As Peter T. Knight suggests,

... assessment is a moral activity. What we choose to assess and how shows quite starkly what we value. In assessing these aspects of chemistry or by assessing German in that way, we are making it abundantly clear what we value in this programme and in higher education in general. So, if we choose not to assess general transferable skills, then
it is an unambiguous sign that promoting them is not seen to be an important part of our work.” (13)

If we look across our own institutions, we will find that much is already being assessed: development funding, grant funding, numbers of students admitted, and student retention. Even if no campus-wide discussion is taking place about the importance of these characteristics, they are being measured and thus matter to our programs. What is often missing from this kind of assessment, though, is an overarching focus on student learning: what, how, and when students learn content, skills, behaviors, and all of what faculty believe is essential to higher education. Without faculty leadership in the student learning-outcomes assessment processes, the quintessential piece of higher education—student learning—is often lost in the barrage of measures, data, and fact-book entries.

Peter T. Knight discusses assessment as being at the heart of an “integrated approach” to learning. The information that comes from meaningful student-learning outcomes assessment lets us know what students are learning, how they are learning, or what they are lacking in terms of knowledge and skills. If we do not know what students are learning, it is very difficult to know what needs to be modified or changed so that students can learn, especially at the departmental or institutional level. Student-learning assessment must therefore be at the heart of higher education, even in honors, because we have to know what and how our students learn. Assessment can provide that information to faculty so that the right decisions can be made and higher education can continue to regain the public trust. Assessment data should inform our decisions at the course and program levels, and it should guide our pedagogical decisions to ensure that our departments, programs, and administrators are making good on the promises we have made to our students and to society as a whole.

As we try to develop intrinsic motivation among the faculty to embrace learning outcomes assessment, perhaps Braskamp & Engberg’s advice about strategy might be a helpful first step. They propose changing the language to promote a “sitting beside” metaphor of assessment as opposed to “standing over”:

Assessment as “sitting beside” reinforces the human element. “Sitting Beside” as an image highlights exchanges and shared responsibility among members of the academy. To “Sit Beside” brings to mind such verbs as to engage, to involve, to interact, to share, and to trust.
While changing the language might be a helpful first step, highlighting the positive effects of the assessment process should closely follow. Faculty should view the outcomes assessment process as an “opportunity” (Hillesheim 5) to take time from our day-to-day teaching/research/service activities and do what we as academics seldom have the chance to do: reflect on our craft. Reflection, as we all know, leads to deeper learning and has transformational potential. Time spent on learning outcomes assessment, whether in an honors course or program, offers an opportunity to realize a variety of benefits.

Several benefits result from learning outcomes assessments. The obvious benefits include the following:

1. improving student learning and development,
2. identifying outdated/redundant curricula, and
3. rejuvenating teaching approaches.

Less obvious or direct results might include these benefits:

1. uncovering different perspectives on what we do that might be helpful in our work,
2. developing a professional identity as a faculty or a program,
3. developing an agenda for achievement of excellence in one’s field,
4. communicating a commitment to our students through self-examination, thus building their buy-in,
5. empowering faculty by giving them a voice in the course/program redesign,
6. building internal and external community through the collaboration that assessment necessitates,
7. discovering new collaborative partners in the assessment taskforce community,
8. gaining institutional support,
9. increasing available resources,
10. more closely aligning management practices with needs,
11. showcasing faculty/program achievements,
12. creating opportunities for self-promotion,
13. gaining outside validation of our work,
14. finding new friends and supporters for the work we do, and
15. building the community’s respect through publication of self-study results.

When faculty and the community can see the data about student learning and discover what and how students are learning, they experience a transformational moment. Faculty often see critical thinking, for example, as an important goal in honors, but we need to explain how, where, and when it is taught directly; how students have learned it; and how we know that they have learned it.

When a measurement tool reliably and appropriately measures an outcome, the data become useful and critical thinking becomes more than a nice concept. Faculty members begin to talk about how to increase student skills in an area, they share pedagogies, and they may participate in program-wide workshops or discussions. The walls that often surround an individual faculty member’s classroom can come down, and student learning can become the important focus. Faculty may also start to look for new teaching methods that measure student learning in authentic ways. These types of transformative conversations and actions can make major changes in the culture of an honors college or program. We believe that faculty members desire transformational teaching and learning and that our list of assessment benefits, along with the “sitting beside” metaphor, can help honors faculty see the value of this practice. If faculty can find the task relevant and engaging, they might thus view this exercise more as a glass half-full rather than half-empty.

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On Assessment, Imagination, and Agency: Using Rubrics to Inform and Negotiate the Honors Experience

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Joan Digby’s passionate article about the role of rubrics in outcomes assessment is well-timed and pertinent to contemporary issues in honors education. In her piece, Digby argues that outcomes assessment and the rubrics that often accompany it stifle imagination, creativity, and outside-the-box thinking that all honors educators hope to foster in our students. “My goal,” Digby writes, “is not to score or measure students against preconceived expectations but to encourage the unexpected, the breakthrough response that is utterly new, different, and thus exciting.” Digby’s illustrations reveal her assumptions about assessment and rubrics today but the question is whether her assumption—that assessment and rubrics necessarily stifle the imagination essential to honors education—stands up to scrutiny. One can debate the merits of rubrics, but to argue that they stifle imagination or creativity is problematic.
As an educator, I have been drawn to rubrics at times and repelled at other times. After working with students at various levels for many years, I have come to learn the value of rubrics that are well-crafted. Poorly crafted rubrics are, as Digby says, nothing more than “little boxes far less colorful and ingenious than Rubik’s Cube,” but well-crafted rubrics can be instrumental in helping students learn and helping teachers assess their learning.

A well-crafted rubric is difficult to create, and it might be easier to dismiss the entire notion of rubrics than to devote the time and effort necessary to create an effective one. However, honors education is never about doing things the easier way. If we challenge our students to view notions of society and their disciplines from a different perspective than ones that are familiar to them, then we must challenge ourselves to do likewise. An effective rubric should not place students or their work into boxes but should be a working, fluid, and negotiable document that allows students to pursue success in a variety of ways; it should state what students need to accomplish without being prescriptive in how they get to that point.

Because a good rubric is fluid, it can provide students with the power and flexibility to determine their own definitions and applications of abstract concepts. Let’s take the example of a much-desired skill in honors programs: leadership. The leadership competency rubric for Minnesota State, Mankato Honors Program’s electronic portfolio states that students need to “use personal theories and values of leadership within campus or community organizations” by the time they graduate. The rubric does not tell them which organization(s) to participate in, which personal theories and values to use, how to use these chosen theories and values, or how to articulate their application of theory into practice within their electronic portfolio. Students can fill that box in a variety of ways. The rubric tells students what they need to do, but our students create it and give life to it. As a result, the rubric allows them to negotiate their best way to achieve the end result. The goal is achievable in a variety of ways, but throughout the negotiation process honors faculty and staff advise students and provide feedback when needed or asked so that students know what is required of them; it would be unfair to ask students to explore the concept of leadership and then just let them go out on their own, hoping they come back with something effective.

Because of the standards-driven pressures on the K–12 system, students are often not asked to engage in activities as open-ended as in college, especially in an honors program or college. In an honors section of First-Year Experience or Introduction to Honors course, the instant confusion when students are
asked to “reflect” is almost palpable. Most first-year students, through no fault of their own, have no idea what that means. Reflection is a nebulous concept that often results in students’ submitting written work closer to description than reflection. Rather than dismiss students’ attempt at reflection, we need to teach them the importance of good reflection. John Zubizarreta speaks to the usefulness of reflection when he says that it is “desirable in promoting better learning, but it is also challenging and painful, demanding a level of self-scrutiny, honesty, and disinterestedness that comes with great difficulty” (7). Students come to understand what reflection means by reading successful examples, submitting multiple drafts, and—brace yourself—consulting the rubric. An advanced reflection, according to our rubric, is written in interesting prose, has an established thesis and theme throughout the text, and provides clear, thoughtful examples of links between new learning and past and future experiences. Students’ ultimate goal in First-Year Experience or Introduction to Honors is to navigate this process of reflection and learn how best to achieve an advanced reflection.

Well-written rubrics are effective because they help educators give students assessments that are valid and reliable, assuring that the assessment measures what it is supposed to measure and that it produces consistent results regardless of who grades it. Rubrics help us achieve both of these objectives. They also create a level playing field for our students so that we don’t give students the benefit of the doubt or play favorites when we assess student work. Especially when assessing something as complex as writing, we need guidance and reminders about what we are looking for in a student’s paper. If we create our rubrics well, they can provide us with the same guidance and reminders that they provide our students, and they can make both us and them accountable.

Many of us subscribe to the concept that we can negotiate syllabi with our students in facilitating a democratic classroom (Shor, Empowering Education and When Students Have Power), and we can apply the same concept to a rubric. Especially in an honors class, where students tend to think outside the box and contribute innovative ideas, the act of negotiating assessment materials can be an exciting and educational experience for the instructor and the students. Students and faculty collaborate to create many of the rubrics used in our program and in our courses. This collaboration process might take many forms, depending on the context, but we consistently engage students in the process. We ask them if the rubrics make sense to them and if they are fair and reasonable; it is a democratic process where students are
partners in the construction of knowledge rather than an authoritative one where they are given little choice in what and how they learn. This process has resulted in well-written rubrics that students comprehend and respond to with a sense of ownership. My experience indicates that they constantly seek to improve, edit, and revise the rubrics by which they are assessed, commonly approaching an instructor to express confusion over the rubric; at that point, the instructor can and should allow for a conversation about the confusion, possibly resulting in a reconstruction of the rubric. Honors students are a particularly attractive group with which to work on learning outcomes and explore rubrics for several reasons: they have high standards and expectations for themselves and their peers; they value individualism and creativity; they view themselves as co-creators of the community of scholars which they work diligently to be a part of. As a result, honors students are not and should not be satisfied with having a rubric handed to them. They enjoy engaging in dialogue about the outcomes of the course and the means through which they will be evaluated.

Rubrics are tools that we use to assess ourselves as well as our students. Honors programs and colleges must regularly submit reports to deans and other university administrators, and rubrics help us establish our accountability to these administrators as well as to ourselves. As we build upon our successes and integrate new ideas into our strategic plans, rubrics help to identify and categorize our strengths and weaknesses. For instance, the honors program at Minnesota State, Mankato, analyzes results of students’ electronic portfolio reviews annually in order to assess how well we are incorporating the portfolio into our program and how well students are understanding and integrating the portfolio as a reflection tool. Without rubrics as a benchmark for student and program success, it would be difficult to articulate our program’s strengths and weaknesses. We could compile qualitative data through what would certainly be an arduous process, but we would have no quantitative equivalent. With a rubric, we can compile and refer to both types of data in reports to various stakeholders.

The debate over the ethics of measurable outcomes and rubrics is not one that we should ignore; however, quantifiable measures of student success are not going away. Educators are not suddenly going to convince the powers-that-be to eradicate them from assessment processes. Rather than completely discounting rubrics and categorizing them as infections that pollute the purifying spring of education, we should use them to establish a common language while continuing to advocate for our students’ imagination and agency.
We should adapt them in a way that works for our students and for us while at the same time we do what we tell our honors students to do: think outside the box and get creative.

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I read Joan Digby’s essay with interest and found in it concerns I have heard expressed elsewhere. I agree with her that the role of college faculty is to help students “engage deeply in ‘critical thinking.’” As someone who has spent twenty years teaching literature and writing, I nodded in agreement when she stated, “My field is literature—that is, thought and sensibility expressed in words. My field encourages the subjective, anecdotal, oddly shaped experiences that constitute creative writing.” Where I veered away from agreement was her assumption that using rubrics is antithetical to encouraging critical thinking or to the creative expression of these subjective, anecdotal, oddly shaped experiences. I also disagree that using rubrics is merely a means to “measure students against preconceived expectations.” In fact, I would argue that creating task-specific rubrics with students does exactly the opposite.

Not just the choice to use rubrics but the approach to creating them and the format they take express one’s philosophy of teaching and learning.
As someone who values collaboration with my students, supports students’ ownership of their own learning, and looks for opportunities to increase their critical thinking skills, I find many benefits to using task-specific rubrics that evolve from class discussion. This process is ideal for honors students because of their high level of engagement, motivation, and intellectual capability, and it is especially useful in the two-year college where students are often grappling with what it means to be a college student as well as what it means to be in honors.

In considering ways that rubrics can help support the goals listed above, I have appreciated John Bean’s approach to rubrics in *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* because, as the title suggests, it contextualizes rubrics within critical thinking and active learning. Bean delineates a range of approaches to rubrics, each of which can be presented to students: generic or task-specific, analytic or holistic, points or grades or both, grid or no grid (269–276). Discussing these options with the class allows students to consider the pros and cons as well as what each approach suggests about learning.

Task-specific rubrics are particularly beneficial because they increase discussion about the different components of a specific assignment. Students create the rubric’s criteria based on the assignment’s components, describing how they understand the components and the relationship between these components and the students’ own learning. The discussions lead to an increased understanding of the assignment’s purpose and more critical thinking, and they afford students and instructors the opportunity to address confusion or misunderstandings. Additionally, the students blend their own words with academic language to describe the different criteria, thereby becoming more knowledgeable and confident about academic work while also taking ownership of their learning.

Next, the class considers the descriptors, which will demonstrate that the criteria just decided on have been met and the degree to which they have been met. This discussion involves a thoughtful consideration not just of what the criteria mean but how one recognizes them when they are achieved in practice. Students also determine how much detail needs to be provided in the rubric to clarify why the student met a specific level of achievement and what areas might still need more attention. This exercise allows students to articulate what traits reflect achievement of different levels, again using both their own words and those of the specific field.
Our Honors Capstone Seminar concludes in a symposium for which the students determine the specific format—e.g., panels, keynote speaker, PowerPoint presentations—based on the type of research they conducted and the best way to communicate their findings to their audience. Then we create the rubric. As a class, we reflect back over the term, considering the various readings, guest speakers, and research fairs we attended. Rather than my co-instructor and I presenting them with a set of criteria and descriptors for what constitutes successful participation in a symposium, we discuss this question as a group and arrive at collectively at the criteria and descriptors. At the end of one seminar, for instance, instead of the instructors dictating what evidence would demonstrate critical thinking, the students established that the evidence would include considering multiple points of view. Their 2014 symposium rubric included specific descriptors such as “refuted significant counterarguments with relevant research” and “multiple sources and perspectives were clearly connected to thesis.” Thus, students apply what they have learned over the term:

- they think critically about the goal of research and the sharing of research findings;
- they increase their confidence; and
- they increase their ability not just to complete work but to know the purpose and significance of that work.

The collaboratively created rubrics are, in this context, significantly different from their top-down counterparts. Again, this student-centered approach is especially important at a two-year college as students grow into their identity as honors students before transferring to four-year schools.

Generating task-specific rubrics with my students offers opportunities I consider central to my work as an educator: it becomes a means for learning at the beginning of an assignment and not just during assessment at the end; it encourages students to move beyond the idea that everyone evaluates achievement in the same way or that assessment is entirely relative based on the instructor; it affords clarity and transparency about assignments; it increases students’ ownership of their learning; and finally it creates more collaboration in the classroom. Rather than providing means to “measure students based on preconceived expectations” or limiting student creativity, rubrics in this process become a tool for enhancing learning and empowering students.
REFERENCE


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RESEARCH ESSAYS
Using Iceland as a Model for Interdisciplinary Honors Study

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INTERDISCIPLINARY INSTRUCTION: VALUES AND CHALLENGES

Interdisciplinarity is a well-established educational approach that speaks directly to our understanding of what knowledge is and, more specifically, what practical knowledge is. Despite its long history, the concept of interdisciplinarity continues to raise essential questions: whether knowledge is anchored in particular fields of investigation separate in nature or can be found in a breaching of disciplines, across fields of investigation; how we might attain such cross-reference; and whether it is even possible to achieve a synthetic, interdisciplinary understanding or if knowledge is invariably anchored in separate disciplines occasionally informing each other. The term has not just epistemological value but practical interest for educational systems that aim to achieve educational value through interdisciplinary studies.
Since Plato’s and, to a lesser degree, Aristotle’s invocation of the philosopher as the synthesizing procurer of all knowledge, a variety of thinkers have pursued the notion of knowledge as a holistic state of mind. For example, Hegel’s nineteenth-century ideal of “absolute spirit” is probably the most significant vision of a unified consciousness, but, long before Hegel, the concept of the Renaissance man, or “Uomo universale,” set the stage for an educational ideal that became central to Western educational systems, not least in general education and honors programs. At the same time, the opposite of this ideal is evident in the many disciplines to which school children are exposed in elementary and high school systems, where the ideal is for the student to become a whole person at the end but by taking a set of rather dissociated, kaleidoscopic paths to get there.

In modern times, the ideal of interdisciplinarity has become contentious. Julie Klein expresses it well in terms of higher education:

As the modern university took shape, disciplinarity was reinforced in two major ways: industries demanded and received specialists, and disciplines recruited students to their ranks. The trend towards specialization was further propelled by increasingly more expensive and sophisticated instrumentation within individual fields. ( . . .) Although the “Renaissance Man” may have remained an ideal for the well-educated baccalaureate, it was not the model for the new professional, specialized research scholar. (21)

In educational systems, the notion of “real-world significance” (Repko, et al., 2013) is paramount to our educational enterprise from first grade onwards, pedagogically tuned to the different stages of ability. Students must obtain an education that prepares them well for real life in addition to attaining the technical particulars of their chosen discipline as they complete their undergraduate education. The holistic enterprise has here been reduced to the general education mission of adding breadth to education, typically in a series of general education requirements that elicit limited enthusiasm from students who are focused on their major. In a sense, the ideal is interdisciplinarity while the method is, in effect, a cementation of disciplinarity.

Let there be no doubt about the relevance of disciplines for K–12 and higher education, yet we undoubtedly experience some “nostalgia for lost wholeness” (Klein 12) if ever there were such a thing. More than nostalgia, the need for experiencing a sense of wholeness seems to be a fundamental human condition that consequently ought to be cultivated in education as a response to inevitable existential questioning along with attainment of a
specialized trade. Perhaps we are now finding ourselves in a situation where the spectrum of academic fields and their specialized knowledge has become so dominant, so efficient, that we must look to interdisciplinary studies with renewed interest in order to reestablish something lost. Interdisciplinary approaches do not merely satisfy an abstract longing; in post-educational life—especially in our secular, Western, post-modern culture—young people must confront complex issues that transcend any one discipline. Educational systems accordingly have a duty to offer frameworks for understanding this complexity that go beyond any single discipline. In this sense, interdisciplinarity promises a very practical tool kit.

For example, consider the clash of belief systems as it unfolds between traditional religious practices and the scientific understanding of evolution. These two systems of thought take no prisoners, and we need not give examples of how the antithesis unfolds locally, nationally, and internationally, inside and outside educational systems, and with the most practical and deadly ramifications. We cannot understand this conflict through only one lens. An interdisciplinary course encompassing, e.g., theology, science, history, sociology, and psychology would seem a promising framework for practical understanding and real usefulness as postgraduates navigate their lives.

Setting aside a discussion of when in the educational sequence an interdisciplinary experience is optimal (perhaps it ought to be integrated at every level), a number of questions arise. If we use a standard definition of interdisciplinarity such as “inquiries which critically draw upon two or more disciplines and which lead to an integration of disciplinary insights” (Haynes 17), the interdisciplinary project must begin by determining which disciplines to include, how the integration will happen, and which insights should be achieved. In the Washington State University Honors College, we have developed a productive interdisciplinary model geographically centered on Iceland and incorporating four academic angles, or disciplines. We have taught this upper-division honors course, Interdisciplinary Iceland, three times (in the fall of 2010, 2011, 2012) with an average of twenty-five students. In addition, a faculty-led trip to Iceland during the summer of 2012 (also involving Norway) provided valuable experience. In hopes that our course might serve as a practical model for other honors programs, we describe how the course came about, the content areas of the course, the student accomplishments and reactions, and the benefits and complexities of our particular model.
INSTRUCTOR INTEREST

We chose Iceland as the theme for our interdisciplinary honors class after we discovered at an informal social gathering that we shared a deep interest in the country. Iceland had been in the news at the time (2009) due to its economic problems, but the country attracted our interest for a number of reasons. Andersen is Danish, was educated in Denmark, and has for years taught the Danish language as well as Scandinavian literature and culture, including Icelandic sagas. He is thus familiar with Iceland, which historically has had close ties to Denmark, and from a cultural standpoint finds the Icelandic sagas and language especially appealing. Thorgaard’s initial interest in Scandinavia stems from his Norwegian ancestry. However, his research area is the genetics of fish, making Iceland an appealing topic both from a genetics standpoint, since much work has been done on the genetics of the human population of Iceland, and also from a fisheries standpoint because Iceland has some of the most productive and efficiently managed fisheries in the world.

In approaching this interdisciplinary course, we saw the focus on Iceland as providing a geographic filter for identifying topics of historical and contemporary relevance (Greenough). In the development of an interdisciplinary course, a primary challenge is finding a natural means to limit the content while at the same time finding a theme that has coherence. Focusing on a specific geographic region is an excellent way to provide a natural focus that at the same time offers significant content areas. Iceland is especially appropriate in that regard: as an island; its borders are distinct and unambiguous; it provides diverse windows into a range of disciplines; and it offers a distinct cultural history. The island was settled mainly by Norse immigrants after CE 871 (Sverrisdottir et al.), and since then Iceland has achieved stature for its commitment to science and sustainability. Socially, Iceland also provides a useful avenue for exploring contemporary economic issues. Given all these options, we identified four topics to focus on in our class: culture, environment, genetics, and economics.

TWO TRIPS TO ICELAND

Neither of the instructors had visited Iceland prior to deciding to teach the interdisciplinary course, so we needed to develop first-hand familiarity with the country. We made two trips to Iceland: the first was an exploratory visit before the course was taught, and the second, two years later, was in conjunction with a study abroad experience for undergraduate honors students.
The exploratory visit lasted three days and provided us with a brief but helpful introduction to the country. Arriving at the Keflavik international airport in the morning, we visited the “Blue Lagoon,” a geothermally heated pool, on our way the capital city, Reykjavik. During our visit we walked around the city center and visited the National Museum as well as museums related to the sagas and the settlement of Reykjavik. We also took a “Golden Circle” bus tour that included the geological fault site where the European and North American plates meet and which is also the historic site of the Icelandic parliament. The bus tour also visited a large geyser and a dramatic waterfall. A ride on Icelandic horses through the rugged countryside was a high point of our first visit.

Our second visit, lasting six days, was conducted with eight undergraduate students as part of a trip that also included eight days in Norway. After extensive pre-planning and interaction with Icelandic experts in various fields, we designed activities that included visits to the biotechnology company DeCode Genetics, the National and Settlement Museums, the Arni Magnusson Institute at the University of Iceland for the preservation and promotion of Icelandic culture and language, the Icelandic Innovation Center, which fosters start-up companies, and the freshwater fisheries management agency. The visits were highly interactive and provided opportunities for the students to ask questions of the Icelanders they met. The students also had ample time to explore on their own. They kept a log of the trip and prepared a paper on an issue related to Iceland or Norway. This visit deepened our own background about Iceland and appreciation for it.

FOUR DIMENSIONS

Focusing on culture, environment, genetics, and economics enabled us to address these topics across the history of Iceland and thus bridge the present to the past. This holistic dynamic of present conditions examined in light of past history underpinned our interdisciplinary course to a high degree and reflected the vivid relationship that Icelanders have with their past. Sustainability versus depletion of the environment has particular relevance to the Icelandic past and present (Diamond 197–210), and the geographical isolation of Iceland has been beneficial to modern genetic research that in turn has provided insights into the demographic of the original settlers. Finally, the Icelandic financial crisis of 2008 may be examined in the context of the nation’s socio-political history. In the following two sections we sketch the content areas of these four topics and some cross-cutting issues.
The history of Iceland begins in CE 871, as documented in an interesting exhibit at The Settlement Museum (Sverrisdottir et al.). A wall fragment found below a layer of tephra deposited around 871 confirms information from other sources about the settlement of Iceland by a Norwegian exodus in the late ninth century. The settlers were people uncomfortable with the nationalistic (and taxation) ambitions of Harald Fairhair, the Norwegian king who managed to unify Norway around 872. Iceland was a promising North Atlantic island with a fair climate and plenty of unspoiled resources on land and at sea only a couple of days sailing from the west coast of Norway. It was by and large empty, ideal for a Norse lifestyle, and soon the Golden Age of the Icelandic Commonwealth began.

This Golden Age embodied the equality of individualistic, free farmers and is celebrated in the unique Icelandic saga literature depicting early Iceland and written down in the thirteenth century by presumably Icelandic Christian monks in a cultural environment apparently eager not to forget the flamboyance of the Golden Age, including its pagan mythology. The early Icelanders took land and lived on unfortified farms with their farmhands, servants, and slaves, spread-out across the island that within a few decades became fully settled (Vesteinsson 164–174). Apart from a vivid picture of love, intrigue, raids, and the social mores of an early medieval society, the sagas describe the legal disputes that were often settled at the annual Althing, the all-island gathering in June when laws were revisited and lawyers argued cases. The Icelanders paid no taxes, and the absence of an executive police force meant that judgments had little finality; the involved parties still had room to maneuver post-judgment, resulting in either monetary compensations or revenge killings with feuds to follow. In CE 1262, the gravity of this legal situation had escalated to a point where five powerful families had the potential of causing destruction at a socially unsustainable level. The decision was made to subject the island to the rule and protection of the Norwegian king, conveniently located across the Atlantic (Byock). This political decision brought an end to the Golden Age; Iceland’s national trajectory now became embedded in continental political dynamics in which it had little or no influence so that it eventually became a poor and exploited entity at the outskirts of European civilization.

In contrast to the other Scandinavian languages, Icelandic is a conservative language that, given Iceland’s historical and geographical isolation, has undergone relatively little change since the Golden Age and hence is close to
Old Norse, the language spoken by most Scandinavians a thousand years ago (Leonard). This unique linguistic situation provides contemporary Icelanders with a direct cultural, if not emotional, insight into their origins. As we attempt to bridge culture with the environment, genetics, and economy, we need to consider how the cultural past manifests itself in modern Icelanders as they face contemporary social issues.

ENVIRONMENT: THE PHYSICAL SETTING

The environment as a broad theme provided a number of interesting issues to explore related to Iceland. Iceland geographically is much warmer than might be expected from its northern latitude due to the effects of the Gulf Stream. It is also a unique setting geologically, being located on the mid-Atlantic rift where the European and North American tectonic plates meet, so it is one of the most volcanically active countries in the world and provides a natural means of exploring a central paradigm of modern geology: continental drift. Iceland’s geological setting also has implications for its energy production; it is a world leader in harnessing geothermal energy and is very active in training people from other countries in this technology (Andresdottir). Much of the heating capacity in the country is based on geothermal energy. Iceland also has exceptional hydroelectric resources that are economically important and lead to the potential for large-scale production of hydrogen gas, which can be used as a fuel source for cars, buses and boats (Arnason and Sigfusson), affording our class an opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of various energy sources (Muller), to explore issues related to energy alternatives and sustainability, and to discover ways that our country can learn from the Icelandic experience.

Another major Icelandic environmental theme, in addition to the physical setting and its implications for energy production, is the abundance and management of fisheries. We opened the discussion by reading the classic 1968 paper “The Tragedy of the Commons,” which addresses resource management and economics (Hardin). The main theme of the paper is that if a resource is held in common, a common path is toward overutilization and degradation. Such was the path that Icelandic fisheries appeared headed down until the country adopted an ITQ (individual transferable quota) system for management of its ocean fisheries (R. Arnason; Eythorsson). The positive result was deterrence of overfishing as harvest was limited to individuals who had a right to a defined quota (percentage) of the fishery, with the total harvest defined by professional fishery managers. The negative result was related
to social equity: new participants in the fishery were limited because of the high cost of purchasing ITQ rights from existing fishers. Consequently, the ITQ system could have either positive or negative effects on small fishing communities depending on the availability of ITQs. The ITQ system represents one general approach to addressing the “tragedy of the commons.” Iceland’s freshwater fisheries (especially harvest of sea-run Atlantic salmon) are based on a similar property rights approach since landowners adjacent to river fisheries control access and harvest (Ingolfsson). Iceland thus offers multiple opportunities for our country to learn from the Icelandic experience in managing common-property resources.

**GENETICS: DNA MARKERS**

A third major course emphasis was human genetics, for which Iceland is a unique laboratory. The present population is largely derived from those early settlers from Norway and the British Isles starting in around CE 871, with little immigration in the last thousand years (Gulcher et al.; E. Arnason et al.). The ancestry of present-day Icelanders is unusually well-documented, creating a distinctive opportunity for associating traits in the present-day population with particular markers that have been inherited from the founder population. With a common ancestry, the likelihood is greatly increased that a shared DNA change (mutation) is responsible for a specific disease in the population that is influenced by genetic factors. The interpretation of this genetic legacy provided an opportunity to expose the class to a number of modern methods in human genetics.

The reconstruction of what occurred around the time of settlement is an interesting area of study in which researchers have analyzed the patterns of genetic markers on the mitochondrial DNA (which is present in both males and females, but inherited through the female) and the Y chromosome (which is present in and inherited only through the male). Differences in frequencies of markers for both types of DNA exist between humans in Norway and the British Isles. The results in the present Icelandic population indicate that the majority of the male founders were from Norway while the majority of the female founders were from the British Isles (Helgason, Sigurdardottir, et al.; Goodacre et al.). Analysis of ancient DNA from the remains of early settlers demonstrates that frequencies of genetic types were quite different in the founding population from the present population, likely reflecting chance genetic changes in the small populations present around the time of and after settlement (Helgason, Lalueza-Fax, et al.).
Associating DNA markers with traits in the present population is of both theoretical and practical interest. Such studies provide the potential to develop a better understanding of and ability to predict disease states (e.g., Peltonen et al.; Stefansson et al.) and might lead to the development of improved drugs for treatment of disease; understanding the biochemical basis of disease can provide insights into potential approaches to treatment. This potential and the unique opportunity presented by the well-defined Icelandic population led to the founding of DeCode Genetics, a company based in Iceland that had the goal of using human genetic studies to improve medical treatment. The company hoped to partner with pharmaceutical companies in developing treatments for widespread diseases having a genetic basis. The history of the company, from founding and rapid growth through subsequent bankruptcy and development under new ownership, provides an interesting case study in biotechnology and economics as well as numerous examples of excellent modern science in human genetics (Specter; K. Stefansson, 2010).

Some important issues in biomedical ethics have arisen as the analysis of the present-day Icelandic population has proceeded (V. Arnason). DeCode Genetics for a time was granted access to DNA samples and medical records of all Icelandic people under a “presumed consent” rule adopted by the Icelandic government. This approach quickly met resistance and raised serious ethical questions that ultimately led to the rule’s being overturned (Specter). Thus, in addition to fundamental issues in science and economics, the Icelandic genetics experience provides opportunities for discussion of important ethical issues (Annas).

**ECONOMICS: DRAMATIC SWINGS RAISE QUESTIONS**

The fourth area of emphasis of the course was economics, more specifically the Icelandic financial crisis of 2008 and our discussions of how this crisis might affect the culture and its decision making. The crisis revealed an extreme contrast between the level of affluence that immediately preceded it and, in historical perspective, the relatively modest living standards that had characterized Iceland in modern times after the abject impoverishment of the late Middle Ages (Lacy). Iceland gained a questionable notoriety in the economic crash of 2008 (Lewis). From 2003 to 2007, the Icelandic banking sector had become completely privatized, setting in motion an apparent recklessness in financial services in which the conduct of Icelandic bankers has been likened to the pirating behavior of their ancient compatriots (Jónsson 18). A scheme of reckless lending at low interest rates had many Icelanders
engaged in national and international business ventures and lifestyle improvements (the sale of SUVs notoriously skyrocketed) by obtaining loans mainly in foreign currencies, made possible by an artificially high Icelandic krona. The consumerist feast was financed by an extreme influx of foreign currency from investors in mainly the UK and the Netherlands, lured to the investment bank *Icesave* by the promise of exceptional returns. These commercial dynamics brought Iceland’s external debt, mostly held by the banking sector, to fifty billion euros, more than six times Iceland’s gross domestic product. In conjunction with the international crisis, the Icelandic bubble burst, and within days all three of Iceland’s commercial banks collapsed, leaving the Icelandic government and population in a state of shock and embarrassment but, worse, with a magnitude of debt.

As the dire situation became clear and the parameters of the near-national bankruptcy were understood, severe public protests ensued. Investors in the UK and the Netherlands and their governments were not amused either. The UK briefly invoked terrorist legislation to seize Icelandic assets, to the serious consternation of Icelanders. Eventually Iceland secured bailout loans from Scandinavian countries and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, in two national referenda in 2010 and 2011, the Icelanders overwhelmingly rejected taking responsibility for the losses of foreign investors. Negotiations are ongoing, complicated by the desire of many Icelanders to join the EU and hence the need to act responsibly as perceived from an international perspective (Halpern 6). The result of Icelandic austerity policies, however unpopular, has been economic improvement according to standard measurements as reported by IMF (International Monetary Fund). The country is still ranked at the top of the most developed countries in the world with one of the lowest rates of income inequality in the world (Weiner 141–184). However, the effects of the crisis will doubtless be felt for years if not decades to come in personal economies and have already resulted in a sizable number of Icelanders choosing to emigrate (Nordic Centre for Spatial Development).

Time will tell if the Icelandic response to solving the social and economic problems was wise. For the purposes of our course, Iceland proved an excellent pedagogical laboratory for a discussion of the international financial crisis and its effects on real people, with the defined cultural and geographical nature of Iceland enabling an intimate look into the crisis from economic, political, and personal perspectives. A number of key players in the Icelandic crisis—investment bankers, government officials, high-level politicians, and ordinary Icelanders—were depicted in excellent films and documentaries
with all their anger, confusion, and disagreements. Furthermore, our students learned a lesson about how different political forms of organization leave governments with a different set of possible responses to the same crisis. For example, a comparison of Iceland to Greece, Portugal, and Ireland demonstrates that confinement to the euro left these other countries with fewer options than Iceland. In turn, Iceland’s serious courtship of EU membership must be explained by parameters other than the merely economic. Overall, the ongoing economic debacle provided our classroom with a social reality that constituted a productive basis for exploring the overlapping confines of history, culture, genetics, and environment.

**CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES**

In addition to dealing with a range of disciplines (culture and literature, environment, genetics, and economics), our course specifically dealt with issues at the interfaces of these disciplines. We introduced the students into the real world of complex issues that overlap between the humanities and the social and natural sciences. This approach also had the benefit that the diverse population of students in our class stayed engaged in the course since issues close to their own specialties arose throughout the course (see discussion of student projects and course evaluations below).

**CULTURE AND ECONOMICS**

It has been suggested that the cultural conditioning of the Icelandic character—beyond mere greed—contributed to the misère of the Icelandic financial crisis. The argument is that centuries of external political and economic dominance released a counter-explosion of hubris, a kind of carpe diem akin to the opportunism of the Viking ancestors, or a recklessly liberated optimism following centuries of repression by outside dominance (Jónsson 10). Essentially, the perspective is that this psychology enables an entrepreneurial spirit just lying in wait for the right circumstances and perhaps little concerned with the consequences. Regardless of the value of such psychologizing of national character, difficult to pinpoint, Icelandic society definitely celebrates a narrative of their Viking origin much more than they do the following centuries of dependence.

After the return to Norwegian protection in CE 1262, the history of Iceland is a dismal exercise in exploitation and dominance by foreign powers on top of a seriously deteriorating climate that intensified existential hardships.
First a protectorate under Norway, Iceland then became a part of Denmark along with Norway during the Middle Ages. Icelanders remained subjects to Danish rule following the split of Denmark-Norway after the Napoleonic wars but were granted home rule in 1874 by Denmark. Finally, after a national referendum in 1944, Iceland granted itself independence from Denmark, as a republic, while Denmark was occupied by Germany. It could be argued that Iceland’s declaration of independence contains an element of opportunism, given the inability of Denmark to object, as opposed to a continuous and more radical revolt for the sake of national freedom; nationalistic sentiments had been in vogue in Iceland (and everywhere) since the early 1800s but took the form of civilized, intellectual debate. A more productive reasoning would rather link the overextension of the financial recklessness of 2008 to participation in the general international greed paired with a lack of institutional oversight of financial instruments. The extent to which Icelandic bankers overcompensated for a national inferiority complex is a matter for anecdotes and speculation. All nations, big or small, could be made into exhibits of inferiority one way or the other, and Iceland showed plenty of gumption during the 1970s cod wars with Britain and the unilateral 200-mile extension of its fishing rights.

Clearly, the issue of how culture informs economic and political events is an explosive subject of great educational value; it was an occasion for our students to cross-cut all aspects of the course, including fishing rights, personal genetic information, saga characteristics, and environmental sustainability, to mention but a few.

CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

A second example of interfacing disciplines was between culture and the environment, including an additional overlap with economics. The discussion of the “tragedy of the commons” provided an avenue into this interconnection. Icelandic fishery managers have improved the operation of ocean fisheries from a biological standpoint by restricting the number of fishers (“limited entry”) and the amount caught per fisher, thus avoiding overharvest of the stocks and appearing to have significantly improved the health and abundance of the ocean fish stocks near Iceland. However, this policy has raised serious questions of equity: those holding the licenses to fish are a small, privileged subgroup of Icelanders which others are largely restricted from joining except at a very high cost. Our students were able to see in this example the analogies with American society when exclusive licenses and privileges are granted.
CULTURE AND GENETICS

The disciplinary interface between culture and genetics allowed us to consider two types of evolution: cultural and biological. The study of language and cultural practices both place Iceland as a Scandinavia-dominated society. Icelandic is a modern language very close to Old Norse and basically the same as the language spoken by the settlers over a thousand years ago. Its present form has changed much less than the Norwegian dialect from which it was derived. Since language undergoes mutations over time much as DNA does, the Icelandic language can be said to have a low mutation rate in comparison, for instance, to continental European languages, including the other Scandinavian languages. Similarly, most Icelandic cultural practices are Scandinavia-derived. In contrast, genetic inheritance in Iceland is decidedly mixed, with a majority Norwegian male ancestry and British/Gaelic female ancestry. Consideration of the history and cultural factors leading to these contrasting outcomes was a good introduction to genetics for the students.

ECONOMICS AND ENVIRONMENT

Within a few generations of Iceland’s settlement in the late ninth century, its forests had been cut down, and the exhaustion of this all-valuable resource for heat, ship repair, and house building meant that the population had to readjust in order to achieve a sustainable existence on the largely volcanic island (Diamond 197–210). The sense of physical limitation brought about by these conditions—geographical isolation and lack of natural resources—undoubtedly brought Icelanders together by necessity and prepared them for the political welfare state of equality and access that characterizes twenty-first-century Iceland. The notion of “commons” takes on particular importance for a country whose interior consists of barren lava fields and whose entire border faces the imposing Atlantic. In this sense, Icelanders have nowhere to go (save emigration) and thus need to sustain the available resources for the common good. This fundamental attitude as a cultural reference point marks every Icelander and largely shapes decisions involving the community, including management of fishing resources, the fishing industry, sports fishing rights, and geothermal energy, to mention some of the more important elements in the national GDP. Obviously, as the financial crisis demonstrated, not every decision has been made in this light, or perhaps a negative feedback loop of communal sentiments caused everybody to jump on a bad investment bandwagon. However, when the damage was done, Icelanders characteristically
pulled together in protest, and the responsible politicians quickly did their part, for the protection of the Icelandic investor and Icelandic society, to place into receivership the three private, commercial banks that caused the near-total collapse of the Icelandic economy.

Due to the rich availability of geothermal water and experience processing it for heating private housing gratis, Iceland is a world leader in geothermal energy and regularly consults with representatives of other countries on sustainable energy. In this technological sense, Iceland is a role model. Whether other cultures can or want to replicate the Icelandic social model, which attempts to be sustainable as a political “commons” model, is another question, and these were questions that introduced our students to the complexity of societal issues in the crosshairs of economy, environment, and culture.

**ECONOMICS AND GENETICS**

The saga of the Icelandic biotechnology company DeCode Genetics provided an exceptional opportunity to examine issues at the interface of economics and genetics. Since it was founded in 1996 with the vision of studying the Icelandic population in order to better understand the genetic basis of human disease and thus improve therapy, the company has been a focus of attention and, in some cases, criticism. The scientific model under which it was founded was affirmed by the excellent research the company conducted, but its economic promise failed in the collapse of its stock value and subsequent bankruptcy. It ultimately survived in a reorganized form and was purchased by the U.S. pharmaceutical company Amgen (Baker). Recently it spun off a subsidiary whose goal is to market methods for deciphering medical information from human genome sequence data (Dorey).

The DeCode experience also raises questions about the appropriate role of government versus private industry in conducting fundamental research. The early history of the company, when the Icelandic government for a time allowed the company access to samples and medical records of the Icelandic population under a “presumed consent” policy, is controversial, allowing our class to address the broad issue of defining appropriate boundaries for privacy related to genetic issues.

**ENGAGEMENT AND EVALUATION**

The success of any course stands and falls with student engagement. An honors course of twenty-five students seems particularly well-suited for
interdisciplinary perspectives since at the outset students represent a variety of disciplines from foreign language and history majors to life sciences, nursing, physics, mathematics, fine arts, and engineering. The interface of such different outlooks on our four chosen topics—culture, environment, genetics, and economics—is bound to constitute a fertile foundation for discussion provided students get on board with the meaningfulness and usefulness of the course.

**STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

As a complement to the four topic areas, we decided to take risks pedagogically. We employed different techniques with the deliberate aim of presenting variation in delivery. Both instructors attended all classes, with one often taking the lead in presenting a subject with the other injecting his voice with commentary and questions relative to student participation. This system alone provided an interesting cross-cutting of perspectives as when the literature professor interjected social concerns derived from the Sagas about the field of contemporary Icelandic sports-fishing management and sustainability. For example, if individual Icelandic landowners hold all fishing rights to the rivers flowing through their land and consequently charge rich foreigners astronomical fees, is this exclusion of outsiders a violation of the concept of the “commons”?

Likewise, the molecular biologist, demonstrating genetic factors that have determined in part the cultural heritage of the Icelandic population, would ask, for example, if the influx of Celtic females in the early Icelandic population favorably influenced the artistic literacy that resulted in the Sagas. The interplay between professors served as a productive bridging of academic cultures, showing students first-hand how different academic backgrounds may fruitfully benefit and relate to each other. The questions raised in these kinds of interplay demonstrate the potential of interdisciplinarity.

More often than not, our discussion format consisted of group discussion of assigned readings in small groups that then reported to the class. This set-up was effective in involving all the students as much as possible and in distilling the knowledge we gleaned from each text in a student-centered manner. As for written assignments, part of the final grade was a group research project on a topic chosen in conjunction with the instructors. Groups of two or three students (occasionally individuals) would pick a fairly defined topic such as “Geothermal Technology in Iceland,” “Genetics in Iceland: The Past, Present and Future,” “A Whale of a Tale: The Culture of Whaling in Iceland,”
“Translating Globalization: The Icelandic Language,” “Understanding Ancient Iceland through the Sagas,” or “Incestuous Iceland?” and weave in the cross-cutting perspectives that are so important to interdisciplinary study.

STUDENT EVALUATION

The students were generally satisfied with the course; 71.21% of all students having taken the course one of the three semesters it was offered responded “Outstanding” or “Above average” to the question “What is your overall rating of this course?” on the WSU Honors College’s extensive online course evaluation survey. More significantly for the interdisciplinary structure, 90.55% of all respondents agreed that “I realized connections between areas of knowledge that I hadn’t appreciated before” and “I learned to relate course material to the real world.” In other results, 94.87% indicated they had learned “A great deal” or “A fair amount,” which 81.47% attributed to the readings, 84.98% attributed to in-class discussions, and only 57.74% saw as a result of the group project.

Most importantly, 100% agreed that the course taught students how to “develop informed global perspectives and apply them to issues confronting societies” and helped them “understand how science and cultural and social factors shape global issues,” these being the major aims of our interdisciplinary approach. As for the benefits of the course to the individual honors student, 92.86% agreed that, as learning outcomes, they “saw how my values or ethical system shaped my inquiries and actions,” and 100% agreed that the course helped them to “consider new ideas and perspectives.” In ranking the level of difficulty, 90.54% found the course either “Challenging but manageable” or “Just right.”

More important than numbers were the constructive comments we received on the online evaluations, which generally mirrored the numbers-based survey responses:

- I had come in with very little previous knowledge of Iceland, but I have learned a lot about culture, both ancient and contemporary, as well as current economic and sustainable strategies.

- I liked that it was cross-disciplinary and we studied more than just the culture or science angle. Being a liberal arts major, I naturally enjoyed the cultural aspects more, but found the connections to science fascinating upon occasion. I especially enjoyed the guest speaker on volcanism.
I liked learning about aspects of Iceland that had very concrete real
world applications—how they use renewable energy, how they han-
dled the economic crisis, etc. I also liked learning about their culture
in a modern context—loved talking with the Icelandic guest speaker.

I really enjoyed that this class incorporated dozens of viewpoints
focused on one subject: [. . .] flexible (in terms of topics covered) honors course that I have taken.

It seems like such a narrow focus, but really brings in a lot of different
topics and forces you to think about how they all interact.

I knew almost nothing about Iceland but now I know a lot.

This is one of the best courses I’ve taken while in college. It captures the
spirit of the WSU Honors College and has made me a better thinker.

Some students remarked on the value of the dual-professor format:

It was interesting to learn about Iceland from more than one perspec-
tive. The professors did not always agree on certain analysis and this
encouraged students to speak up as well.

The ability to learn about a different country, all aspects of it, and be
able to discuss the similarities and differences with the professors and
my classmates.

While such comments warm a professor’s heart, not every student was satis-
fied with all components of the course:

Some readings were lengthy and uninteresting.

It was difficult jumping back and forth between literature and science.

**MAKING IT BETTER**

One of the main challenges of the course was to make the fascinating
but distant, little-known country of Iceland seem real, both for the instruc-
tors and the students. The instructors’ three-day visit prior to the first course
transformed the country from an abstraction to a reality for us, exposing us
to dominant features of the environment, such as geothermal activity and
geologic instability, as well as important cultural facets in major museums.
Relating our experiences to the students helped make the country real for
them as well.
From our experiences during the first year, we concluded that having a native Icelander visit with us would be an important addition to the course; such people are rare in a small American town. There is only about one Icelander for every thousand Americans, and most of them are still in Iceland. However, we were able to identify a native Icelander who kindly agreed to visit our class for a question-and-answer session during the second year. We held this session about two thirds of the way through the course to insure that the students had a good background about the country by the time she visited. The visit was a great success and an important step toward making Iceland real for the students. Although she was not able to join us during year three, we believe that having a native Icelander visit the class was a high point that should be included if at all possible.

Two other mechanisms that made Iceland seem less abstract were having guest speakers who had direct experience with the country and showing movies based in Iceland. A geologist who had worked in Iceland, for instance, provided a fresh picture of the country that the students appreciated, and several recent documentaries presented a current picture of Iceland and its people: “God Bless Iceland,” “The Future of Hope,” and “Maybe I Should Have.” The films all dealt in different ways with the economic crash and its aftermath, and some of the best class discussions followed the viewing of these films.

We believe that using a geographic region as the theme, a “geographic filter,” is a good model for interdisciplinary instruction, providing a natural and organic boundary for the scope of an interdisciplinary course. Iceland presented a particularly good focus for our set of backgrounds and interests, but Hawaii, for instance, would be another obvious candidate of a remote island community. Furthermore, issues at the interface between Hawaii and Iceland (e.g., language, genetics, sovereignty, environment, and geology) could provide interesting dynamics. What matters is engaging the students and making the location real for them.

CONCLUSION

Almost always, honors programs and colleges include a significant focus on interdisciplinary coursework in their curricula. Our honors course, Interdisciplinary Iceland, shows one way that we as educators may engage more narrow disciplines from a holistic perspective. Interdisciplinary teaching always focuses on disciplines as well as the connections between them, the “disciplinary” being balanced by the “inter.” What is sought is another
consciousness, a practical understanding liberated from disciplinary perspectives. In the field of economics, the concept of “heterodox economics” has increasingly gained attention as a correlate to traditional, mainstream economic theory’s emphasis on individualistic rationality. In contrast, “heterodox economics,” as an umbrella term for different economic theoretical approaches, develops a holistic perspective, insisting upon “... commitment to an ontological analysis that takes social reality to be intrinsically dynamic or processual, interconnected and organic, structured, [and that] exhibits emergence, and includes value and meaning and is polyvalent” (T. Lawson, ctd. by Davis 23). This approach to social reality seems to hold promise for heterodox educational practices in honors, encouraging modes of teaching, learning, and understanding that transcend disciplinary outlooks.

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Generative Intersections:  
Supporting Honors through 
College Composition

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Given the current emphasis on acceleration toward graduation, common sense might seem to argue against First-Year Composition (FYC) as a compelling course offering in an honors curriculum. Many honors students enter college with significant college credit: Advanced Placement and dual enrollment programs allow students to fulfill their first-year college writing requirement and other lower-division requirements before leaving high school. These programs are flourishing. The number of students taking an AP exam in high school has nearly doubled in ten years, with over a million high school graduates taking an AP exam in 2013. That year, 58% of English Language and Composition AP test-takers and 55% of the English Literature and Composition cohort earned a 3 or better on the exam (College Board).

During the same time period, 82% of high schools offered dual enrollment courses, and 93% of the courses with an academic focus awarded college credit immediately upon course completion (National Center for Education...
Statistics). Two million students strong, dual enrollment is changing the landscape of students’ first two years of college, in many cases affecting their decision about whether to enroll in First-Year Composition.

The deck seems stacked against Honors Composition. However, before passing over the course for a more appealing requirement, we should examine the benefits of the class for the honors student. Annmarie Guzy has recently reviewed some of these merits, citing research that shows a correlation between enrolling in FYC and achieving success in future academic writing. She also shares data indicating that honors students make frequent sentence-level errors, suggesting that they would benefit from additional instruction, and she contends that college writing instruction promotes needed holistic growth in research and writing. In light of these benefits, she argues that first-year students should consider the advantages of enrolling in First-Year Composition before substituting it with an AP score.

Disciplinary activity in the field of writing studies is adding strength to Guzy’s stance. Trends in composition teaching are creating intriguing parallels with honors, paving the way for shared goals and unique collaborations. Grammar, citation, library search engines, and thesis statements continue to be important but have also been joined by other aims that align admirably with the commitments of honors. Honors directors and composition faculty would do well to become familiar with their mutual aims, opening the doors for partnerships that support honors students’ development as writers and thinkers.

Three disciplinary trends in particular make First-Year Writing a likely candidate for an honors curriculum: the field’s increased attentiveness to reading as an area of emphasis, its growing interest in metacognition and learning transfer, and its potential for facilitating digital engagement. Taken together, these characteristics suggest that the first-year writing course deserves a second look.

CONVERGENCE #1: STRATEGIC READING PRACTICES

Historically, reading has held a privileged position in the honors curriculum. Ted Humphrey notes that “the early practitioners of honors education regarded it primarily as a kind of subject matter, that is, as a classically based education in the Great Books, organized either historically or topically” (16). At some institutions, this emphasis continues to hold sway; many honors courses take as their centerpiece “rigorously classical masterpiece reading
lists,” functioning as “the only place a student who is not a classics major might encounter Homer or Sophocles” (Schuman 2006).

Alongside this tradition, however, a range of other pedagogical approaches have emerged, with the focus shifting to features like independent research, community involvement, self-reflection, cross-disciplinary integration, and experiential learning. On the surface, this evolution may seem to have demoted reading from its pedestal; however, a closer look reveals that reading remains central to the activities of the honors student. Undertaking a weighty research project; synthesizing the traditions of multiple disciplines; navigating the policies and procedures of a community organization: all require reading versatility and comprehension. Even the City as Text™ curriculum, with its emphasis on reading place over textbook, begins with the written word: participants are assigned “introductory material to read before meeting in order to ground the issues in some way” (Machonis 147), and a new NCHC monograph focuses on the crucial role of reading and writing throughout the experiential process (Long).

Strong reading skills, then, continue to be essential for the honors student. To be prepared for their honors courses, students need to have strategies for persevering through complex ideas, disciplinary conventions, dissonant perspectives, and challenging vocabulary. They need to have the tools for navigating unfamiliar genres and the facility to identify claims, evaluate reasons and evidence, and respond to the ideas of others. First-Year Composition, with its renewed interest in reading, is one site for this learning to occur.

Nationwide, composition directors have signaled their interest in reading in the Writing Program Administrators’ WPA Outcome Statement for First-Year Composition. Developed by a national professional organization of composition directors, this document describes the key skills that students should develop in their introductory writing courses. In the statement, reading—described as facilitating “inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating”—is placed alongside critical thinking and writing as a central skill. At my own institution, reading appears explicitly or implicitly in multiple FYC objectives. By the end of ENG 101, students should be able to:

- view texts through a rhetorical lens, using concepts like audience, purpose, context, medium, and design to evaluate an author’s discursive choices;

- explore texts as genres, identifying key features of specific text types to aid them in new writing situations;
• analyze the claims, evidence, and reasoning in academic and non-academic texts;
• recognize similarities and differences between authors’ stances and be able to synthesize their points of view;
• assess the credibility and suitability of sources they have gathered and understand the content sufficiently to use them as the basis for a research project.

The assumptions underlying these goals are shared by many composition programs today: namely, that students benefit from having a range of reading tools and guided experience with difficult texts in multiple genres to become strong writers. Stated plainly, writing teachers are interested in nurturing flexible and savvy readers. Composition and honors directors should work together to identify these kinds of shared reading goals, partnering in the task of facilitating students’ reading competency.

**CONVERGENCE #2: SELF-SUFFICIENT LEARNING**

“Collect, select, reflect” may well be the unofficial motto of the honors program at my institution, where crafting an e-folio is a central occupation of the honors student. The e-folio’s reach is significant, informing course design and student activity. Honors director Christopher Corley stresses to new honors faculty that every honors course should yield a potential contribution to students’ e-folios; students are expected to amass learning artifacts each semester (“collect”) and to identify those that most clearly demonstrate their progress through the honors program’s competencies (“select”). This assembly process, however, is insufficient; every experience must be probed. A commonplace of the honors program is that experience is richer when paired with reflection. Honors students are routinely asked to engage in self-assessment, monitoring and recording their growth as leaders, researchers, and global citizens. The e-folio is the site where this reflection is on display: students must show not only that they have achieved but that, through reflection, they understand the meaning of their achievement.

The MSU Honors Program is not alone in embracing metacognition as a key practice. Many honors programs are incorporating reflection into their program outcomes and actualizing it through learning portfolios (see Appendix A in Corley and Zubizarreta for some examples). Folio advocate John Zubizarreta has aptly described the motive behind the movement: portfolios
help students understand the learning process, enabling them to recognize what, when, and how they have learned and to articulate why this learning matters. Portfolios also help honors students connect learning experiences across disparate environments, constructing their activities into “a coherent, unified developmental process” (124). Zubizarreta characterizes this bridge-building as the “[linchpin] of lifelong, active learning” (124). In general, the goal of reflective portfolios is to teach students habits of mind that might power future self-directed learning.

Such habits of mind have caught the attention of composition instructors as well. Historically, writing teachers have set their sights on the future, generally embracing the preparatory responsibility of English 101, yet recent scholarship suggests a more concerted effort to ready students for subsequent writing endeavors. Composition teachers are designing writing-oriented research projects that are informed by research on learning transfer by educational psychologists; through these projects, teachers are exploring what students do with the knowledge and skills gleaned in first-year writing and how tailored instruction might aid in future applications. This research focus was adopted in a 2011–13 scholarly project entitled “Writing and the Question of Transfer,” hosted by Elon University with collaborators from over thirty universities; it was taken up again in the 2012 Special Issue of Composition Forum on the theme “Writing and Transfer”; and it was featured multiple times on the program for the 2014 Conference on College Composition and Communication, the flagship conference of the field, in panels like “Teaching for Transfer,” “First-Year Composition and the Quest for Transferability,” and “Transfer and Transformation.”

In short, the conversation on learning transfer is going strong. One conclusion that has been drawn thus far is that students benefit from pedagogies that employ not just action but also reflection to instill cross-context application. A popular approach involves teaching generalizable concepts, providing opportunities for students to apply these concepts in multiple contexts, and cementing these concepts in students’ problem-solving repertoire through metacognition. The last step is key: researchers from the Elon Institute assert that reflection “often plays a key role in transfer, and reflective writing promotes preparation for transfer and transfer-focused thinking” (4). They suggest “[assigning] activities that foster the development of [students’] metacognitive awareness” and “explicitly modeling transfer-focused thinking and the application of metacognitive awareness as a conscious and explicit part of a process of learning” (5). To maximize the benefit that
students receive from their courses, composition teachers are heeding such recommendations, experimenting with contemplative teaching practices that promote learning transfer.

A shared interest in boosting the takeaway from their courses/programs, then, has led composition faculty and honors directors to reflection as a key practice. Their common investment in this activity positions them well to collaborate on honors outcomes and curricula that nurture the lifelong learner.

**CONVERGENCE #3: ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION**

Honors students typically come to college with a rich extracurricular background. Whether through sports, music, clubs, student government, community service, or other means, honors students have usually sought out multiple opportunities to be involved. Honors programs strengthen this participatory bent, stressing engagement in local and global communities. Service learning requirements and study abroad programs, both common features of honors programs, encourage students to adopt an outward orientation, to stretch themselves through interaction with and assistance to others. At my institution, a leadership requirement further nurtures this habit; students participate with others through planning, organizing, and directing organizations and activities. They enroll in honors courses like Leadership in Context, Growing the Leader in You, and Developing your Mentor Philosophy, and they are invited to participate in Leaders of Tomorrow, a community-based leadership program. At the end of their degree programs, they must showcase their contributions to the campus and/or community and include an overarching leadership philosophy in their e-folio.

Preparing students to engage and lead, then, is a central goal of our honors program, and it is an explicit or implicit aim of honors programs across virtually all college settings. One component of this preparation particularly relevant to the composition classroom is training as writers. In many situations, students’ ability to lead effectively will hinge on their ability to produce effective prose. Writing’s universal importance may account for NCHC’s decision to list “developing written communication skills” as the first of five objectives that most honors courses should strive to achieve (National Collegiate Honors Council). First-Year Composition can help instill this writing competence.

Increasingly, though, writing proficiency is a necessary but insufficient facet of effective communication. As Claire Lutkewitte observes, “Old and new technologies have enabled, and even demanded, the use of more than
one mode to communicate, entertain, solve problems, and engage in deliberation” (2). New channels for communication have evolved and risen in stature as digital exchange has become the norm. This shift has exerted pressure on composition specialists to think differently about their work. “The contemporary difference,” according to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), “is the ease with which we can combine words, images, sound, color, animation, video, and styles of print in projects so that they are part of our everyday lives. . . . The techniques of acquiring, organizing, evaluating, and creatively using multimodal information should become an increasingly important component of the English/Language Arts classroom.”

In digital environments and beyond, the sophisticated rhetor is the individual who can coordinate modes of composing, capitalizing on the unique opportunities they afford to create an accessible and cohesive message. Composition teachers have been retooling to be able to support students’ multi-faceted rhetorical development; in the last fifteen years, multimodal teaching practices have gained prominence, with a swell of scholarship exploring the theoretical and practical dimensions of designing and assessing new media projects. Advocates of multimodal teaching stress that “in personal, civic, and professional discourse, alphabetic, visual, and aural works are not luxuries but essential components of knowing” (NCTE). What once may have seemed like icing on the cake has now become a necessary communicative tool. Multimodal composition teachers also assert that writing students apply themselves more and learn more when they have opportunities for varied rhetorical decision-making and for greater creativity.

The multimodal movement has the potential to augment honors programs’ emphasis on participation and engagement by helping students learn to compose effectively in digital environments. Composition teachers could partner with honors directors to re-envision the e-folio, for instance, and could help honors programs determine what forms of instruction and support would be necessary to achieve the desired product. Working together, composition teachers and honors directors can help students sharpen their contributions to the world—on paper and the screen.

**CONCLUSION**

While the pressure to accelerate progress to graduation threatens to erase composition from the honors program map, activity in writing studies is building a new case for its presence in the curriculum. A closer look reveals that composition and honors share more interests and commitments
than one might initially assume. It behooves both parties to explore these common interests and to discover anew how composition might enrich honors education.

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Honors and the Completion Agenda: Identifying and Duplicating Student Success

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For better or worse, longitudinal studies that track student persistence each semester serve as the primary measurement of an institution’s success or, as the findings are often received at many of the country’s community colleges, an institution’s failure. These studies take place at the institutional and state-wide levels as well as nationally through grant-based organizations such as Complete College America. At the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), where I have served as a faculty member and honors program director for the past eight years, these studies consistently reveal low college-wide retention and graduation rates. According to Maryland’s state-wide longitudinal approach, even after discarding the statistics of students who attempt fewer than eighteen credits, barely two of five CCBC degree-seeking students graduate or transfer within four years (CCBC, “accountability report”). Accordingly, discussion of success rates often strikes a tone somewhere between apologetic and mournful.

An occasional collective lapse into hopelessness is not without just cause. In my non-honors courses, the underprepared and overburdened are often
the norm. Each semester, seemingly capable students in my standard classroom drop out to care for family members or make ends meet, disengage with coursework after a bad grade, or simply fall behind in their readings and fail to catch up. When I return to my office in the honors center though, I, like honors directors at community colleges across the United States, work with the highly motivated and attentive rather than the apathetic and disengaged. Routinely, I observe students in the honors center celebrating a hard-earned “A,” reveling in a newly awarded scholarship, or cherishing a transfer acceptance.

The contrast of these experiences is remarkable but not necessarily based on readily apparent differences between honors and non-honors students. Often these two groups of students do not seem all that different from one another. At CCBC, students are accepted to the honors program based on a holistic application process. On the campus at which I serve as honors director, most internal applicants opt out of submitting high school transcripts or SAT scores, so the Honors Committee judges their applications on the merits of their writing and their current college transcripts. This policy opens the program to students who might have been mediocre high school students. Some have completed high school through a GED program, and others have had stop-out periods, breaks in their matriculation. They may have taken courses at CCBC twenty-two years earlier, transferred laterally from another two-year college, or reverse-transferred from a university. In other words, many of today’s honors success stories at CCBC were yesterday’s dropouts and underachievers.

One goal of my research has been to find ways of offering an honors education to a wider range of CCBC’s general population—particularly the majority of its population that needs some form of developmental training—in order to make honors a scalable program that can assist the college in increasing its success rates, most notably transfer and graduation rates. Fundamental to this goal is the belief that recruiting honors students from the developmental population—over 80% of CCBC’s incoming students place into developmental education—can have a pluralizing effect on honors diversity as well as increasing enrollment and graduation rates. A secondary goal has been to counterbalance the often grim longitudinal data on the progress (or lack thereof) of community college developmental students. By identifying commonalities among students who began their coursework in developmental education and later became members of the honors program, I hope to recommend policies that can help a larger subset of community college students gain access to honors and thrive there.
METHODOLOGY

Setting

Because this study focuses on student feedback, the college context is important. CCBC is a large suburban institution that serves a diverse population with increasing developmental needs. CCBC has an established honors program founded by Rae Rosenthal in 1988. While Rosenthal has established a large, successful program on one of CCBC’s three major campuses, honors is still finding its footing on two additional campuses as well as several satellite campuses that have been added in recent years. Approximately forty sections of honors courses run college-wide each semester, a small portion of the college’s total offerings. In 2013, college-wide honors program membership included 1.6% of the approximately 24,000-student credit division (CCBC, “Who are CCBC students?”).

Population

The population for my research was CCBC honors students who began their studies in developmental education. The CCBC Honors Program maintains records for all program members that include data provided by students in their application packets as well as transcripts updated each semester. I audited these records in February 2012, reviewing each student’s transcript to determine his or her placement in English, reading, and math. According to this audit, 60% (189 of 315) of CCBC honors students began their studies with at least one developmental course requirement. Developmental coursework is defined for this study as any sub-100-level course in reading, English, or math that students place into through the College Board’s Accuplacer test. This rate of 60% was lower than the 81% of the college’s general population placed into developmental coursework (CCBC, “accountability report”). These percentages account for neither the number of developmental courses in reading, writing, and/or mathematics that students were required to take nor the level at which they placed. To measure these factors, I compiled the names of each developmental course and listed them in the fourth column of the table below along with details about each of the twenty-nine students who participated in focus groups and/or interviews.
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Sampling Procedure and Sample Set

In the intensity sampling methods I used for this study, the data draws from a subset of the honors population that closely resembles the general population at CCBC. Roulston defines intensity sampling as a method that seeks research participants based on “phenomena of interest” (82). For my study, these phenomena included lengthy or regular stop-out periods in formal post-secondary education and completion of multiple developmental courses and self-identification as members of a race underrepresented in success data. I identified students’ educational history and racial background using CCBC software. Students participating in this research took an average of 1.9 developmental courses. While the college-wide black/African American population, the largest non-white population at CCBC, represented 38% of the credit division, my sample set included 34%. According to internal surveys, the honors program is only 18% black/African American, so the sample set resembled the college as a whole more than the honors program, creating the potential for policy recommendations designed to diversify honors.

Focus-Group Design

To identify potential reasons for student-participants’ success at the community college, I created a focus-group script designed to generate dialogue among all members of the group. Focus-group sessions lasted between 45 minutes and 75 minutes. Probing was reserved for the interviews that followed the focus groups.

The original script included questions based on each category of Tinto’s Theory of Departure, which identified eight reasons for withdrawal from college: intention, commitment, adjustment, difficulty, congruence, isolation, obligations, and finances (80). Since participants were persisting at the community college (some have since graduated or transferred), script questions asked students the means by which they have avoided each of these causes for withdrawal. The resulting discussions provided rich data as students conversed about their experiences through the structured prompts without my interruption.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in three major stages, which helped me cope with a large volume of data, categorize the initial set of codes, and place the data in time-order sequence. First, I manually coded the data using an open-coding
approach. Open coding allowed me to review over 175 pages of data in search of themes and patterns (Neuman 442) and resulted in nearly three pages of codes. Next, I searched for patterns in the data, narrowing the extensive list of codes to five themes: escape, newness/discovery, ownership/responsibility, growth/health, and balance. The codes were then placed into a time-order sequence that created the overarching theme of college as a journey that I found in the discussions. The journey theme can be found in the modified seven-part focus-group script, included as an Appendix, which prompts participants to discuss their starting location, the course they charted, their impediments to their progress, their outlook, their early progress, the ways they created a sustainable journey, and the assistance they received from travel guides. This script was designed as a reusable model for future research.

**FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

After coding each focus group and follow-up interview conducted for this study, I placed the data into time-order sequence, allowing me to create a composite of the journeys the students undertook, from their decision to attend college through their sophomore year. I discovered two factors that had an overwhelming influence on the research participants’ decision to apply to the honors program and more generally on their academic self-image: faculty members’ personal recommendations for the honors program and casual, unofficial assistance and advice from peers. These experiences were most effective in recruiting students—at least those who participated in my study—into the honors program during their first semester, when students develop their outlook on college and their place within it. My reform recommendations are thus designed to increase both faculty recommendations for honors and honors student interactions with non-honors peers during the crucial first semester of matriculation.

My research findings along with the resulting recommendations hold broad implications for honors programs at open admissions institutions and indeed for all honors programs looking to grow and diversify through fostering the success of the nontraditional student. Implementing the reforms and strategies identified through this research can be one component of an honors program’s effort to increase diversity, and it can also contribute to the federal college completion agenda by helping students chart courses to completion that include honors credits. The success-based, qualitative methodology used for this project can also be duplicated in other honors-based studies oriented toward growth and diversity.
My research suggests several strategies to replace the small, boutique-model honors program with a scalable, diversely populated one applicable to many types of honors programs at community colleges. The term “honors” is broad, covering all programs and colleges that self-identify as such. At a selective institution, a scalable honors program might include 10% of the student body, but community college honors programs may find themselves oversaturated if they seek to emulate programs at selective universities. At a community college, some students who are a part of the credit division are only stopping in briefly to brush up on skills or take single courses required for bachelor’s or master’s programs; others are pursuing majors in vocational programs, such as health care, with strict requirements that potentially preclude participation in honors. Thus, a scalable honors program at a community college may be closer to 5% of the general population.

A 5% goal may seem modest, yet the expansion of a community college honors program to this size could yield formidable improvements in community college completion rates. At CCBC, for example, in the fall of 2013, when 1.6% of the college’s population was in the honors program, the college had just over 24,000 credit-seeking students (CCBC, “Who are CCBC students?”). To increase membership to 5% of the credit division, the program would have had to take on more than 800 new students (totaling nearly 1,200). These gains would hardly have been modest.

Students in honors programs have perks such as smaller classes, excellent faculty, additional advisement, transfer visits, conference opportunities, social events, and designated study space, in addition to the intangible benefits of joining a group of motivated peers. The additional advisement from honors administrators and the motivational effect of honors classes can alter the trajectory of students’ college careers. At CCBC, for example, completion rates are much higher for honors program members than for the general population. A study of CCBC honors students who began their matriculation at CCBC in the fall of 2006 indicated an 84% graduation/transfer rate compared to a graduation/transfer rate of 43% for the general population. During the same time period, 63% of honors students earned a degree from CCBC during the four-year window compared to only 25% of the general population (CCBC, “accountability report”).

At least some of the CCBC Honors Program’s higher graduation rate (more akin to the graduation rate at a selective four-year institution than a community college) can be attributed to test scores, financial backing, and academic self-confidence that are among the highest at the college. Students
who do well on standardized tests and most likely come from financially secure households tend to have the most academic self-confidence and are therefore more likely to apply to honors. But many community college honors students, like those who participated in this study, are at first glance unlikely honors candidates. Low test scores might have placed these students into developmental classes, creating a lengthier path to a degree. Often these students were not high-scoring new college enrollees that the honors program recruited but instead grew from developmental learners into honors students. Increasing the size of the honors program through reforms that help develop or build such students rather than simply finding them can help the college reach its goal of increased completion. At the two-year college, developing honors students should be a major component of a multi-faceted approach to increased completion.

Partnering with Developmental Education

The first recommendation based on my research is an honors application process that accommodates the educational requisites of nontraditional students. Honors programs can gain earlier access to a diverse, highly motivated subset of students through partnerships with developmental education. Since honors courses at many community colleges are general education courses, which students take early in their credit-level matriculation, students who have thrived in developmental courses before progressing to the general education level may have already accumulated thirty or more credits towards their degree before a faculty member, staff member, or peer can recommend honors to them. My research indicated that encouragement from these sources, especially from faculty members, weighs heavily in former developmental students’ decisions to apply to honors. However, by the time students at a community college earn thirty credits, they see few honors courses that will fulfill their requirements and thus little reason to apply to the program.

The mindset that students in developmental education are not honors-worthy should become obsolete in institutions where as much as 80% of the student body needs developmental education. Letting go of this notion is not simply a capitulation to the realities of our educational crisis or a lowering of expectations in an effort to expand. The best returning students, rusty in taking questionably designed standardized tests, often start off in developmental education. They bring rich life experiences with them that can broaden class discussions and collaborations. On the campus where I work, located in a former steel town that has been economically depressed since most blue-
collar employment disappeared decades ago, returning students who have suffered from the realities of an unforgiving job market are typically the most determined, most thoughtful, and most thorough students in their classes.

Recruiting these students requires reforms that allow honors administrators to identify them sooner and encourage them to self-identify as honors candidates before they advance too far in their credit requirements. Several measures can aid in this process, like providing recruitment materials in all developmental gateway classes that lead directly to entry-level credit courses. A single presentation or brochure only provides an introduction to honors. Students are more likely to apply for honors if they are singled out by their instructor and recommended to the program, which provides a tremendous boost in confidence and quiets the fears of rejection that often keep nontraditional students from applying.

Once students learn about honors and feel motivated to apply, the barriers to their acceptance must also be removed. Students with old and often middling or poor high school records have no way to qualify for honors programs with GPA requirements. A modified application that waives the GPA requirement for students in their final semester of developmental education if they have both stellar recommendations and exemplary writing samples could open the doors of honors to a new population. To ensure that these students continue to perform at a high level, honors programs can first admit a small cohort to study their progress or can accept these students as probationary members, privy to all the rights and privileges of honors but with their honors status contingent on excellence in their first semester of honors coursework.

Partnering With Introduction to College Programs

In addition to new partnerships with developmental education, partnerships with Introduction to College courses can promote awareness of honors programs and help identify potential new students. Community college orientation courses are designed to increase completion by introducing new students to the standards and expectations of college coursework. These courses, often completed during a student’s first semester, can serve as a first exposure to honors through strategies similar to those recommended for partnerships with developmental education.

Nationally, college orientation courses exist in a variety of forms. At CCBC, all degree-seeking students are required to take Academic Development (ACDV) 101: Transitioning to College. The course aims to “familiarize
students with CCBC and foster the development of decision-making skills and learning strategies that link to student success in higher education” (CCBC, “Common course outline”). Six participants in my research pointed to ACDV when discussing methods for increasing honors program awareness. Currently at CCBC, honors and ACDV have had some cross-programmatic involvement, but this engagement between the two programs can be scaled up significantly. For the past several years, honors has offered a small number of honors ACDV courses and honors administrators have presented at ACDV training sessions to promote the program to new instructors. Still, some research participants reported that honors did not have a presence in their ACDV class. The point, regardless of the institution, is that neither honors sections of general orientation courses nor presentations to instructors will ensure that new students get exposed to honors.

Honors programs at all two-year institutions with required orientation courses should work closely with the administrators and instructors in these programs to incorporate honors recruitment into the curriculum for all college orientation sections. As in partnerships with developmental education, representation in orientation programs could increase the size of honors programs substantially by directing students to honors in their first semester, when they still have several general education courses to take. If orientation instructors are each given detailed information about the program, they are more likely to recommend honors to their students during their first semester, and, since orientation courses offer students extensive advisement, they can steer more students toward honors courses. Often, enrollment in a single honors course is less intimidating than joining the program for the nontraditional student, who may not feel prepared to apply for full honors membership.

If each orientation instructor/advisor is asked to recommend honors courses for his or her best students, the results could have a significant effect on honors enrollment. Currently, at CCBC, the cornerstone of ACDV is a course matrix assignment that allows students to create their enrollment plans for each semester through graduation. Honors courses are not regularly promoted through this assignment even though a few instructors tout the benefits of honors. Recommending honors courses during this stage of advisement not only helps identify potential honors students during the early matriculation period but helps build student confidence. As a college-wide requirement, orientation courses are the perfect setting for introducing honors programs and are crucial to scalable growth.
Institutionalizing Honors Student Recommendations

Another way to grow honors is to include all of an institution’s instructors in the hunt for potential honors students. In calling for stronger partnerships with developmental education and college orientation courses, I have noted the important role of faculty in encouraging students to try honors courses and/or informally recommending students to the program. Institutionalizing the recommendation process can also dramatically increase diversity. Students who have had long breaks from their formal education, who are economically disadvantaged, and/or who have been marginalized in K–12 socialization are less likely to view themselves as honors students than their younger, affluent, and white counterparts (Ogbu; Zweig). For these students, applying to an honors program can seem like a futile as well as intimidating venture. At CCBC, this harsh reality is reflected in data from a 2012 study that indicate the honors program to be younger, whiter, and more affluent than the college’s general population. The cycle of age, race, and socioeconomic discrimination is thus reproduced further when potential honors students visit the program and see that it consists of mostly young white faces, reinforcing in nontraditional students the notion that they are not honors material.

Faculty recommendations go a long way in countering the cycle of homogeneity in honors program membership not just by informing students of the honors program but by increasing their confidence though the suggestion that they are, in fact, honors-worthy. Many students at community colleges need someone else to believe in them before they can self-identify as honors students. The participants in my research repeatedly indicated that a single recommendation encouraged them to apply for honors.

A college-wide approach to faculty recommendations ensures that more students receive the recommendations they deserve. At CCBC, the honors administrator solicits recommendations from faculty members and then sends letters to students telling them they have been recommended. This letter notifies the student that a faculty member believes he or she is capable of honors-level coursework. Informal recommendations also occur face-to-face. Some instructors, including those who teach developmental courses, consistently recommend their best students. One research participant reported that both her English 101 and her Math 083 instructors recommended her to the program: “That’s when I got active about joining honors,” she noted.

In addition to, or instead of, sending an email and awaiting faculty response, the college can invite students to “get active” about joining honors through other strategies:
A list circulated at departmental or division meetings that requests honors recommendations from each faculty member.

Memos sent by senior administration that require faculty response (faculty may check “I do not feel I have any honors students in this class” if they do not have names to submit).

An honors-designated “A” grade, which I will call “A(H),” which would not change a student’s GPA but would indicate that a faculty member believes the student performed at an honors level and generate that notice to honors programs, who could then solicit the student to apply.

The final strategy is the most complex as it would require changes to an institution’s grading submission software. However, if implemented, this reform would create an automatic system for recommendations by all faculty members in all divisions.

These reforms, as well as those of the previous sections, require a great deal of cooperation from administration and faculty outside the honors program. That kind of effort might not be forthcoming, so changes within the honors program itself are also essential.

From Visibility to Permeability: Increasing Honors Student Interaction with the General Population

In addition to pinpointing faculty recommendations as their motivation to apply for honors, research participants pointed to peers who inspired this turning point in their academic journeys. I think of these peers as “travel guides,” a term broader than the more popular “mentor.” A mentor is one who offers guidance but it is more specifically “a close, trusted, and experienced counselor” (Webster’s). Some travel guides may be mentors, but others simply help elevate a student’s college experience with a single interaction or an interaction more limited than the mentor/mentee relationship. Successful students have many travel guides. Fourteen research participants reported interactions with student travel guides who had assisted or encouraged them at key points in their academic development. Honors students can and often do guide their fellow classmates, yet, as Kinghorn and Smith have observed, non-honors students may perceive honors program members as unlike them and thus unapproachable (17). To counter this perception, the recommendations in this section seek to increase the visibility and approachability of
honors by creating more honors students who can serve as travel guides, at the same time growing the honors program and increasing college completion.

Honors students often volunteer their time to assist classmates with advisement and tutoring. Honors administrators see this type of guidance occurring daily in honors centers, where experienced honors students are often more than willing to lend a moment or an hour to a classmate in need. One of my research participants described the way a fellow student in the honors center played a role that was pivotal to her progress in a developmental math course:

I actually went to one of the honors students . . . I was really struggling and [she] came over and she took time to meet me in between her classes and we sat down at the table and she helped me a lot. We only had like 45 minutes or so together, but it was still helpful . . . She was really good.

Six research participants discussed receiving this type of unofficial guidance, which is especially important to nontraditional students who may be wary of college employees and established representatives of the academic culture (Ogbu; Zweig). Older research participants expressed a particular interest in finding tutoring and advisement from travel guides closer to their age. Such unofficial guidance allows students to gravitate towards members of the program with whom they are naturally comfortable.

Encouraging more honors students to serve as unofficial travel guides can be a thorny endeavor. Many programs experiment with mentorships that assign an upperclassman to an incoming student, but formalizing peer guidance can sharply reduce its effectiveness. One research participant noted that mentorship programs often strike students as impersonal and remarked about a student/faculty mentorship program, “The communication that I got was just one slip of paper in the mail saying, ‘If you want a mentor, fill it out blah blah blah.’” Conversely, participants reported a strong affinity for honors classmates with whom they had developed an organic relationship via the honors center. Honors center interactions often led to peer relationships that included both schoolwork and extracurricular activity, broadening a students’ social networks to include more classmates and increasing their time spent on campus and on schoolwork.

Building a large support network of motivated peers is not easy at a two-year institution with no on-campus housing and a student body often scrambling to remain financially afloat. Students who do not make connections
with peers early in their journey are likely to diminish their time on campus and attempt to reach their destination through a minimalist approach to college life, but students who find and later act as unofficial travel guides receive the numerous benefits of a solid academic network of peers.

The first step in fostering unofficial interactions between honors and non-honors students is establishing program transparency and an open-door policy. The CCBC Honors Program operates with a very high level of visibility and transparency; its open-door procedures include invitations to all students for honors events, flyers promoting honors classes and activities across campus, social networking groups accessible to all, and a course enrollment policy that allows students to sample honors coursework without completing an honors application.

Open-door policies encourage students to explore honors, but a policy of permeability can help grow honors programs through actively recruiting students to use the honors center for studying. Honors programs can encourage their students to serve as unofficial travel guides through an inclusive approach to study groups, which research participants touted as opportunities to learn, develop self-confidence, and create meaningful college friendships. One research participant described the fellowship he developed with study partners:

The people that I’m in study groups with, I think I have a sense of camaraderie with them. Like, I went to a war and these guys were right beside me shoulder to shoulder because we faced the same stressors and the rigors of whatever class that it was and we survived it. And not only did we survive, we did well. . . . I have these groups of people on Facebook that just have a real special place in my heart because of these study groups.

For this student and others like him, study groups serve a paramount role in developing a sense of community; they yield greater gains than sessions with a paid tutor or mentor by giving students support for learning, a feeling of belonging, and a sense of self-sufficiency.

Study groups open to the general college population should take place in designated honors space to optimize the affiliation with honors, and honors students active in the program’s leadership and event organizations can help promote study groups, but administrators must be careful to avoid a mandatory-voluntary approach that would require current honors students to host these groups. Administrators can incentivize student-led study groups in a
variety of other ways. Monetary compensation for study group leaders would be ideal, particularly in recruiting nontraditional students, but maintaining an informal mentorship program with compensation would require creativity. In the absence of monetary reward, refreshments usually incentivize student leaders and attendees while creating a program that is informal. Administrators can keep their distance and empower honors student leaders by having them designate willing honors members to lead study groups. Alternatively, honors faculty members can recruit group leaders according to their academic strengths and collaborate with the student success center to promote them. After an initial study group meeting, students can determine the frequency and times for future study groups independently. Through this approach, honors students become more active while administrative involvement (and the student resistance that accompanies it) remains at a minimum.

Student-led study groups can help honors programs move beyond an open-door policy toward an approach that renders the line between honors and non-honors students more permeable. If honors students serve the general population, the results can enhance student success, build student networks, and promote honors programs.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Further qualitative studies of honors students who began their studies in developmental education would contribute to a fuller understanding of this unique population. To that end, the focus-group script in the Appendix is a reusable model based on the “college as a journey” concept. This script was modified from my original focus-group script to include each portion of the college journey and is designed to allow administrators to consult with students through a structured research methodology. For this study, student-participants generously gave their time as participants in one-hour focus groups, the component of this research that yielded the most recommendations. In exchange, they received only token compensation in the form of $25 per person. This low-cost means of giving students a voice could uncover possibilities for reforming various types of programs.

My study was founded on the belief that research targeting honors students who began their studies in developmental education at two-year colleges could significantly add to policy discussions as well as the collective knowledge base of honors administrators at community colleges. Further study of this subset of the population at different types of community
colleges—smaller vs. larger campuses, wealthy vs. more impoverished areas, and urban and suburban vs. rural regions—could increase our understanding of honors students who began their studies in developmental education. On campuses where this model of qualitative, success-based research takes place, regular performance reviews can help administrators understand the effects of program reforms implemented through research initiatives.

Analyses focused on different subsets of the honors population would also allow researchers to learn more about the habits of honors students. At the start of this project, I considered many possible populations for study. Because survey research consistently indicated that the honors program population at CCBC was generally out of step with the college's demographics, several populations were possible, including honors students who received Pell Grants, who were from underrepresented racial populations, and who were first-generation college students. Ultimately, I settled on honors students who began their studies in developmental education because this population represented such a large percentage of the college as a whole; with 60% of honors students at CCBC taking developmental courses, learning more about them seemed an obvious first step. Future studies that take a similar methodological approach but focus on different subsets of the honors population could add other insights into diversifying and growing honors programs.

The international student population in honors is one subset that merits further study. While three international students participated in this research, many international honors students at CCBC were excluded because the sampling method required that students had taken at least one developmental course in reading, writing, and/or mathematics. At CCBC, students who began their formal schooling in the United States after the seventh grade take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) rather than the Accuplacer test; they are then placed into classes for language learners, a system that feeds into credit-level courses in a system that runs parallel to developmental education. Because of these parallel sub-credit systems, international students are less likely to have taken developmental coursework. At the same time, honors programs attract many international students. A study focused on international students in two-year honors programs would offer insight into the ways non-native students view their college experiences, highlighting analyses of a diverse range of cultures and languages.

I am lucky to work at an institution that is forward-looking and receptive to reform. If the honors program at CCBC is able to enact any of the reforms I have recommended, I will use a mixed methods approach to tracking student...
progress. For example, if honors can partner with developmental education to accept students directly from developmental gateway courses, these students will be tracked as a cohort. Their progress will be monitored for retention and GPA, which can then be compared to the retention rates and GPAs of the general college population and the honors program population. Further, their feedback will be solicited for qualitative measurement. All enacted reforms must be analyzed to determine their effectiveness in recruiting students, diversify honors, and aiding the college completion rate.

**CONCLUSION: HONORS, DIVERSITY, AND COMPLETION**

These are tumultuous times for honors programs housed at community colleges, with three factors making this a pivotal era for honors programs housed in two-year colleges and open-admissions institutions: an ever-increasing percentage of incoming students placing into developmental education, the federal focus on completion data, and the ever-present threat of budget cuts. Honors programs at community colleges may take one of two divergent paths in order to maintain relevance in a climate of federal scrutiny and an evolving student body. One approach is to chase the top end of the long tail of incoming high school graduates, the ever-shrinking percentage of students who enter community colleges qualified for credit-level coursework. As part of a larger strategy to build a scalable honors program, courting such students is perfectly suitable. However, as the only new plan for increased enrollment in honors, this type of approach, if successful, could situate honors programs even further from the general population of community college students. The high school recruitment approach, enacted without concerted recruitment efforts for matriculated students, is likely to lead to an even greater split between honors students and their counterparts in the general population, especially with regard to age since the average community college student is a decade older than the newly minted high school graduate (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014).

Rather than chasing the would-be university student, the best action plan for honors programs at open-admissions institutions is to reposition themselves as agents of change. Many honors programs at community colleges already envision themselves this way, but they face an uphill battle if they plan to diversify the honors population. The CCBC Honors Program, like many honors programs and colleges housed at increasingly diverse two-year institutions, faces major demographic deficiencies in diversity as compared
to the college’s general population. Honors students at CCBC are on average younger, whiter, and more affluent than their peers in the general college population. While much of this unfortunate phenomenon can be attributed to factors that occur before college, honors programs perpetuate these unbalanced demographics when smart, motivated, nontraditional students find too few students like them in the program, thus feeling that honors is not a good fit for students of color, continuing students, evening students, or working students. Administrators need to seek and implement reforms that can persuade more nontraditional and developmental students to join honors, and my research has indicated that such reforms include partnering with developmental education and college orientation programs, institutionalizing the solicitation of honors recommendations, and enlisting honors program students to serve as unofficial travel guides.

The students who participated in this research grew into the role of honors students rather than being recruited from high school. Like their classmates who often do not persist, transfer, or graduate, they faced obstacles, impediments, and external pressures to their time, yet they found their way to the honors program, often through either faculty encouragement or unofficial peer guidance. Once in honors, they were able to take advantage of program features such as smaller, student-centered classes, a designated study space, scholarships, additional transfer advising, and the company of a similarly driven community of peers. Such program features assist honors students in developing the incentive, focus, and motivation to succeed.

Honors programs at community colleges need not exist as “boutique” programs designed for the pre-qualified; they can and should serve a broad swath of the college’s general population. Scaling honors programs up to a size that can allow them to make a notable difference in a college’s completion rate requires funding and space. Just as importantly, identifying the reforms that can lead to growth and diversification is contingent upon a research methodology and administrative outlook that seek not simple numbers and rates of failure but the input of successful students, the type of students with whom honors directors interact daily.

REFERENCES


The author may be contacted at jtrucker@ccbcmd.edu.
APPENDIX

Focus Group Script

“Welcome and thank you for participating in this focus group. The purpose of the focus group is to get your feedback about how we can better serve students such as yourselves.

Specifically, I want to understand what you do to successfully make progress at this institution. I want to understand what has made you successful.

The underlying assumption is that students like you have a good understanding of how to succeed. You have each completed at least one developmental course and you are now in the Honors Program. That is why we are talking with you. We want to hear what you believe to be the experiences that successful students at the Community College of Baltimore County share. Some of these experiences may have to do with the college, specifically. Others may be connected to life circumstances. More than that, we want to know what successful students like you know and do to achieve success.

Categories of Matrix

CATEGORY ONE: STARTING LOCATION

“What were the most important reasons that brought you to college?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend that could help bring more students like you to college?”

CATEGORY TWO: CHARTING A COURSE

“What were your goals at the start of college? How did your goals change or develop during your time in college?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students develop goals?”

CATEGORY THREE: IMPEDIMENTS TO PROGRESS

“What has been the most difficult experience at CCBC for each of you? How have you successfully navigated through those difficulties?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students navigate through these difficulties?”
CATEGORY FOUR: THE EXPLORER’S OUTLOOK

“What were some of the biggest challenges you have faced in your coursework?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students master challenging coursework?”

CATEGORY FIVE: MAKING EARLY PROGRESS

“You all have strong GPAs. When you first started, did you have to adjust to college life?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students adjust to college life?”

CATEGORY SIX: CREATING A SUSTAINABLE JOURNEY

“What, if anything, surprised you about college?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students navigate through these surprises?”

“You each have several responsibilities outside of the classroom. What strategies do you use to help maintain your life outside of the classroom as well as your coursework?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students balance their lives with the addition of coursework?”

CATEGORY SEVEN: TRAVEL GUIDES

“Tell me a little bit about a member of the college—this may be a fellow student, staff member, or faculty member—who has been the most helpful during your time here.”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students develop this kind of relationship.”
Why Honors is a Hard Sell in the Community College

Deborah Engelen-Eigles and Janice Levinsohn Milner
Century College

The proposed honors program at our two-year community and technical college hangs in limbo. At the college president’s request and after attending the 2013 NCHC conference in New Orleans, we developed a comprehensive honors program framework and spent the spring semester of 2014 sharing it with units across the college for discussion and feedback. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Our audiences suggested ways the program could leverage ongoing initiatives to meet strategic college goals and enrich current programming and opportunities for students, both in the technical and liberal arts areas. Moreover, the college saw the initiative as an opportunity to build a unique niche for itself since no other two-year colleges in the state of Minnesota offer a comprehensive honors program of this nature. Despite the many benefits of this proposed program, the administration hesitated to go forward.

The administrative indecision around our proposed program is but one manifestation of how honors education threatens to subvert larger narratives about the purpose of community colleges. Certainly many forces—structural,
financial, and institutional—come together to impact the development of and investment in a new academic program. However, beyond the constraints all institutions face—financial pressures, enrollment issues, diminishing public support, and individual institutional characteristics—prominent contemporary discourse on community colleges seems to define their mission as incompatible with honors education. Two-year colleges have been framed as the locus of remedial classes and “workforce skills training,” not as sites of the academic and professional opportunity sought out by those in the more privileged social strata. Given this assumption about the role of community colleges, they have also been deemed the place of choice for a student population for whom academic and career expectations are low, students without the cultural capital of a middle-class upbringing. However, not only is honors education particularly suited to disrupt this narrative but, at its best, destabilizes it by recognizing all students’ potential and—through mentoring, academic engagement, and high expectations—enabling them to realize their potential.

**THE MISSION OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

The present status of community colleges developed concurrently with major shifts in the economy and education sectors. Prior to the end of World War II, four-year college completion rates in the United States were just 6% for men and 4% for women (National Center for Education Statistics). In the post-war period, good jobs that could support families in a middle-class lifestyle were available to those with at most a high school diploma. The ranks of the college-educated began to increase, however, as returning GIs used their benefits to further their educations. The Truman Commission Report of 1947 further spurred access to higher education by advocating the establishment of community colleges: locally based, open-access institutions of higher education that would democratize access and promote an educated citizenry. Further, a college degree started to become more of a necessity as, beginning in the 1970s, the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy resulted in the loss of readily available, well-paying, union jobs that did not require post-secondary education. Today, however, an increasing number of jobs in all categories require degrees, and young people are told that they have essentially no future unless they obtain degrees and credentials. More and more, the focus on going to college is not to be well-educated but rather to be equipped to get any job at all. At the same time that these huge shifts in the economy have been occurring, college tuition has increased tremendously, even at state
colleges and universities, making community colleges for many students the most affordable institutions of higher education. For this reason, community colleges can be, and for a small segment of their student bodies are, a place for students to start a college degree and from which to transfer to a four-year school, possibly then pursuing graduate study in their chosen field.

However, while 80% of two-year college students express a desire to earn a bachelor’s degree, only 20% actually transfer, and only half of them will have earned a bachelor’s degree after six years (Altstadt, Schmidt, and Couturier 3). For the overwhelming majority of community college students, their institutions are not an entry point to a bachelor’s degree, let alone graduate or professional study, but rather a way station on the road to low-level employment. Industry efforts to save costs by deskilling positions have necessitated that community colleges train workers for discrete job skills such as medical coding and charting. Businesses only want to hire individuals who already possess the specific skills that in the past might have been taught in an orientation period or on-the-job training. Even though this training has been outsourced at worker and taxpayer expense to both publicly supported community colleges and private technical schools, industry still claims it would be able to hire more employees if only they were better trained by our educational institutions. Consequently, political leaders have responded with legislation to fund job training, and community colleges have been seen as the logical place in which to locate these efforts (see, e.g., the Community College to Career Fund Act legislation, Senate Bill 1269, introduced in 2013).

**FORECLOSED OPPORTUNITY**

The problem with a narrow focus on skills training, however, is that, while well-intentioned, rather than opening educational opportunity this focus has resulted in a system of higher education stratified by race and class that tracks poorer students, first-generation college students, and racial and ethnic minorities into job-skill programs leading to low-level jobs with little opportunity for advancement and economic security. As Hanson explains,

> When two-year colleges shifted their focus away from preparing students for continued studies and the baccalaureate, our education network became strictly hierarchical. Top-ranked schools continue to serve the sons and daughters of the privileged. These students continue to receive educations in subjects such as music, history, and physics—the finest and highest achievements of humanity. At
the same time, lower-middle class students attend two-year schools where they learn a set of skills of temporary use to businesses. (Hanson 1–2)

Not only are these students being channeled to community colleges as the presumed choice for their higher education, but the programs to which they then have access and the type of education to which they are exposed and for which they are seen as best suited are restrictive. In effect, this channeling amounts to a continuation of the documented tracking to which these students are subjected throughout their educations starting in elementary school. In addition, as the voices of the powerful—our legislators and even the President—join the push to make community colleges the new locus for job-training programs, thinking they’re doing the right thing, they further reinforce the hierarchy, denigrating education for students of fewer means as “vocationalism fram[es] almost all educational policy for nontraditional students” (Rendón 196). She continues, “If all the community college emphasizes is the opportunity to learn vocational skills at the expense of diminishing other possibilities and diminishing student futures, it reproduces a class structure” (198).

Thus, forces both at the larger societal level and within the institution itself work to maintain the status quo of inequality for the lower-income, first-generation students who make up the greater part of our student body. As Pressler notes, “The correlation between the degree of autonomy in an occupation and the class status it confers is striking. All else being equal, the more routinized and supervised the job, the lower its status and income” (38). Through low-skill vocational training programs, community colleges restrict class mobility and fail to function as the educational steppingstone they were originally intended to be.

In this stratified system, honors education does not fit into the picture of the community college mission. First, students tracked to community colleges are channeled there precisely because they are not seen to have the potential required to benefit from the liberal education and advanced scientific training available at four-year colleges and universities, and thus they are not considered “honors material.” Second, honors education is seen as irrelevant to the discrete work skills promoted in the job-training programs that are currently a primary focus of community colleges. This “lack of fit” between honors and the raison d’être of the community college today becomes a latent factor in decision-making about honors-related programming. Unlike budget constraints that appear in black and white on balance sheets and other concrete
issues such as space and staffing that are more readily visible, this uncomfortable disjunction between honors and the institution’s charge is harder to name and thus to account for in deliberations regarding priorities and the viability of launching a new program.

SUBVERTING EDUCATIONAL STRATIFICATION

At its best, honors education at community colleges has the potential to be subversive and to reject the educational stratification inherent in the current model along with the resultant tracking by race and class. This stratification begins in grade schools whereby white students and those more affluent are likelier to be identified for gifted programming while students of color and poor students flow into special education and are disproportionately subject to disciplinary measures (Codrington and Fairchild; Fenning and Rose; Rinn and Cobane).

Instead, honors programs can level the playing field between more privileged students and the typical community college student, who faces work/school conflicts, low family support, reduced access to paid tutors and prep courses, and low expectations of success (Moritz). Honors education seeks out the potential in all students, recognizing that past bad experiences in school do not necessarily reflect students’ capabilities. As Rendón notes, “many of these students, often labeled ‘nontraditional,’ do not consider themselves to be college material, have never made an ‘A’ in their lives, and have been retained in high school” (196). A recent study at a large community college on the East Coast found that 60% of honors program students initially placed into at least one developmental course (Trucker). In addition, “considerable educational literature documents the struggles of first generation college students with the world of higher education—not with their coursework, but with the culture and expectations of the academic milieu” (Pressler 37). Honors pushes back against these societal expectations and structural barriers that would deprive our students of the educational opportunities and high expectations to which they are entitled regardless of where they come from.

Indeed, recognition of the power of honors education is becoming more widespread as honors programs are growing at community colleges. Not every honors program fulfills this mission, however. To disrupt educational stratification and see all students as having potential, a program must do more than just accept those who already have a track record of academic success; rather, it must include intentional recruitment, mentoring, and coordination.
with initiatives throughout the college that address achievement gaps and meet the needs of underrepresented students. By creating a pipeline through which to move students from developmental classes into college-level and honors coursework and beyond that to transfer, the promise of honors can be fulfilled. Such is the comprehensive program we have envisioned and proposed to our administration.

A CATALYST FOR SOCIAL MOBILITY

The potential for subversion that honors represents goes beyond the educational experience. The role of education in reproducing the social hierarchy is well known. Compared to students who choose to attend a community college, students at elite schools are more likely to draw on the cultural capital of a middle-class background such as private preschool, enrichment activities, books, museums, travel—all taken for granted (Pressler; Digby). This cultural capital, in turn, allows them to leverage their elite education in the labor market with lifelong opportunities for careers that offer security, autonomy, and vertical mobility. Lacking these resources, community college students enter the labor market and their roles as citizens at a significant disadvantage, yet, as Pressler explains, “These intellectual experiences and dispositions can be instilled through an honors education so that students who did not ‘inherit’ them can acquire them and use them to climb the class ladder” (38). In this way, honors is subversive of the class hierarchy because it provides students the tools for social mobility:

Helping our students climb the class ladder is an important latent function of honors education. So is helping our students realize how smart and talented they are despite their society’s assumption that the more something costs, the better it must be. So is encouraging them to develop their own ideas and explore means of living up to and benefiting from their full potential. (Weiner 23)

Thus, as honors seeks to nurture and develop students who do not come to us with the resources and social capital of a middle-class background and who may have been poorly served by educational institutions in the past, it provides them with the social capital to access opportunity and class mobility.

A colleague who directs an honors program at a large community college shared with us the story of one of her graduates. “David” had been unsuccessful in high school, but excelled at the college, joined the honors program, and went on to earn his BA magna cum laude, followed by an MA and PhD, all in
physics. After earning his degrees, he held several prestigious positions and recently founded his own consulting company. He frequently returns to his community college alma mater, serving as a role model to current students, supporting honors scholarships, speaking at events, and offering students paid internships at his company. Stories such as this illustrate the important role honors can play at the community college in changing the trajectory of individual lives.

Honors also has the potential to subvert a dominant current of thought on the position of community colleges in the contemporary higher education landscape. At the same time, it can challenge the resulting stratification by race and class within these institutions and within the larger society. Ironically, honors education has the potential to enact this subversion against the backdrop of the community college rhetoric of “opportunity,” which, while purporting to offer training and jobs, too often constrains life chances and forecloses access to the education and cultural capital that provide real opportunity for advancement and full participation in our society. Indeed, honors education at the community college can constitute a radical project of democratization, bringing the institution back to its roots as originally intended: a community-based, open-access institution (President’s Commission on Higher Education). Fully developed honors programs can embody many of the objectives designed to achieve just such a result. The 2013 Century Foundation report, *Bridging the Higher Education Divide*, calls for destratifying the community college by attracting “talented students from a range of economic and racial backgrounds” and facilitating transfer to four-year institutions; it further suggests that honors programs provide an important vehicle to realize these goals.

**CONCLUSION**

We began this paper by presenting the paradox of indecision regarding a proposed honors program at our college. Our institution is typical in that its experience is greatly shaped by the many issues we’ve discussed. Tuition at two-year colleges statewide has risen as the state’s contribution to the cost of a student’s education has decreased by half. At the same time, the stratification described above is visible at our institution. While the proportion of first-generation college students among our student body has hovered around 61% for the past decade, students of color have increased from 18% to 36% of the student body in that same period, an increase that is all the more noteworthy given that our college is situated in a largely white, suburban area. A sense
that investing in an honors program might be a dramatic and perhaps out-of-character move for the institution arises in part from recent investments and special initiatives in remediation and technical programs at the college. The pervasive notion that honors programs are “elitist,” associated no doubt with the equally misconceived idea that they are relevant only to liberal arts students and not students in technical programs, magnifies the sense that a comprehensive honors program belongs in a four-year baccalaureate program rather than a combined community and technical college.

Thus, our institutional environment is a microcosm of educational and societal stratification and assumptions that job training and students for whom we have lower expectations belong in our institutions while students with bright futures will go elsewhere. Against this backdrop, as counterintuitive as the discussion above may make it seem, the best antidote is precisely a fully realized honors program that functions as a magnet within the community and promotes the kind of economic and racial integration that holds promise for all students by opening opportunity and increasing life chances.

CODA

After initially submitting this paper, we learned that our college administration has decided to move forward with the honors program. We are pleased that they recognize the transformative potential that is honors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank our colleague, Paul Roach, who has been a partner on our honors journey. In addition, we would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions; this paper is stronger for their constructive comments.

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Assessing and Evaluating Honors Programs and Honors Colleges: A Practical Handbook by Rosalie Otero and Robert Spurrier (2005, 98pp). This monograph includes an overview of assessment and evaluation practices and strategies. It explores the process for conducting self-studies and discusses the differences between using consultants and external reviewers. It provides a guide to conducting external reviews along with information about how to become an NCHC-Recommended Site Visitor. A dozen appendices provide examples of “best practices.”


A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges by Theresa James (2006, 136pp). A useful handbook for two-year schools contemplating beginning or redesigning their honors program and for four-year schools doing likewise or wanting to increase awareness about two-year programs and articulation agreements. Contains extensive appendices about honors contracts and a comprehensive bibliography on honors education.

The Honors College Phenomenon edited by Peter C. Sederberg (2008, 172pp). This monograph examines the growth of honors colleges since 1990: historical and descriptive characterizations of the trend, alternative models that include determining whether becoming a college is appropriate, and stories of creation and recreation. Leaders whose institutions are contemplating or taking this step as well as those directing established colleges should find these essays valuable.

Honors Composition: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Practices by Annmarie Guzy (2003, 182pp). Parallel historical developments in honors and composition studies; contemporary honors writing projects ranging from admission essays to theses as reported by over 300 NCHC members.

Honors Programs at Smaller Colleges by Samuel Schuman (Third Edition, 2011, 80pp). Practical and comprehensive advice on creating and managing honors programs with particular emphasis on colleges with fewer than 4,000 students.

The Honors Thesis: A Handbook for Honors Directors, Deans, and Faculty Advisors by Mark Anderson, Karen Lyons, and Norman Weiner (2014, 176pp). To all those who design, administer, and implement an honors thesis program, this handbook offers a range of options, models, best practices, and philosophies that illustrate how to evaluate an honors thesis program, solve pressing problems, select effective requirements and procedures, or introduce a new honors thesis program.

If Honors Students Were People: Holistic Honors Higher Education by Samuel Schuman (2013, 256pp). What if Honors students were people? What if they were not disembodied intellects but whole persons with physical bodies and questing spirits? Of course . . . they are. This monograph examines the spiritual yearnings of college students and the relationship between exercise and learning.

Inspiriting Exemplary Teaching and Learning: Perspectives on Teaching Academically Talented College Students edited by Larry Clark and John Zubizarreta (2008, 216pp). This rich collection of essays offers valuable insights into innovative teaching and significant learning in the context of academically challenging classrooms and programs. The volume provides theoretical, descriptive, and practical resources, including models of effective instructional practices, examples of successful courses designed for enhanced learning, and a list of online links to teaching and learning centers and educational databases worldwide.
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The Other Culture: Science and Mathematics Education in Honors edited by Ellen B. Buckner and Keith Garbutt (2012, 296pp). A collection of essays about teaching science and math in an honors context: topics include science in society, strategies for science and non-science majors, the threat of pseudoscience, chemistry, interdisciplinary science, scientific literacy, philosophy of science, thesis development, calculus, and statistics.

Partners in the Parks: Field Guide to an Experiential Program in the National Parks by Joan Digby with reflective essays on theory and practice by student and faculty participants and National Park Service personnel (2010, 272pp). This monograph explores an experiential-learning program that fosters immersion in and stewardship of the national parks. The topics include program designs, group dynamics, philosophical and political issues, photography, wilderness exploration, and assessment.

Place as Text: Approaches to Active Learning edited by Bernice Braid and Ada Long (Second Edition, 2010, 128pp). Updated theory, information, and advice on experiential pedagogies developed within NCHC during the past 35 years, including Honors Semesters and City as Text™, along with suggested adaptations to multiple educational contexts.

Preparing Tomorrow's Global Leaders: Honors International Education edited by Mary Kay Mulvaney and Kim Klein (2013, 400pp). A valuable resource for initiating or expanding honors study abroad programs, these essays examine theoretical issues, curricular and faculty development, assessment, funding, and security. The monograph also provides models of successful programs that incorporate high-impact educational practices, including City as Text™ pedagogy, service learning, and undergraduate research.

Setting the Table for Diversity edited by Lisa L. Coleman and Jonathan D. Kotinek (2010, 288pp). This collection of essays provides definitions of diversity in honors, explores the challenges and opportunities diversity brings to honors education, and depicts the transformative nature of diversity when coupled with equity and inclusion. These essays discuss African American, Latina/o, international, and first-generation students as well as students with disabilities. Other issues include experiential and service learning, the politics of diversity, and the psychological resistance to it. Appendices relating to NCHC member institutions contain diversity statements and a structural diversity survey.

Shatter the Glassy Stare: Implementing Experiential Learning in Higher Education edited by Peter A. Machonis (2008, 160pp). A companion piece to Place as Text, focusing on recent, innovative applications of City as Text™ teaching strategies. Chapters on campus as text, local neighborhoods, study abroad, science courses, writing exercises, and philosophical considerations, with practical materials for instituting this pedagogy.

Teaching and Learning in Honors edited by Cheryl L. Fuiks and Larry Clark (2000, 128pp). Presents a variety of perspectives on teaching and learning useful to anyone developing new or renovating established honors curricula.

Writing on Your Feet: Reflective Practices in City as Text™ edited by Ada Long (2014, 160pp). A sequel to the NCHC monographs Place as Text: Approaches to Active Learning and Shatter the Glassy Stare: Implementing Experiential Learning in Higher Education, this volume explores the role of reflective writing in the process of active learning while also paying homage to the City as Text™ approach to experiential education that has been pioneered by Bernice Braid and sponsored by NCHC during the past four decades.

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC) is a semi-annual periodical featuring scholarly articles on honors education. Articles may include analyses of trends in teaching methodology, articles on interdisciplinary efforts, discussions of problems common to honors programs, items on the national higher education agenda, and presentations of emergent issues relevant to honors education.

Honors in Practice (HIP) is an annual journal that accommodates the need and desire for articles about nuts-and-bolts practices by featuring practical and descriptive essays on topics such as successful honors courses, suggestions for out-of-class experiences, administrative issues, and other topics of interest to honors administrators, faculty, and students.
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