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## Transformative Learning: Lessons from First-Semester Honors Narratives

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# Transformative Learning: Lessons from First-Semester Honors Narratives

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## INTRODUCTION

Although the National Collegiate Honors Council has clearly articulated the common characteristics of “fully developed” honors programs and colleges, these elements describe the structures and processes that frame honors education but do not directly describe the intended honors outcomes for student learners (Spurrier). Implicitly, however, the intended outcomes of distinct curricula, smaller course sizes, honors living communities, international programming, capstone or thesis requirements, and any number of other innovative forms of pedagogy are qualitatively different from faster degree completion, better jobs, or higher recognition at graduation. When intentionally directed, honors education promotes the full transformation of the student (Mihelich, Storrs, & Pellet).

Both the potential and challenges inherent in promoting transformative learning have a long and rich tradition in the scholarship of pedagogy, with different theorists prioritizing distinct features of the process and

targeting different outcomes. Dewey, Freire, and Mezirow (in *Transformative Dimensions*), for instance, each argue—independent of the specifics of their models—that transformation is best accomplished when it is the explicit goal and attention is given to facilitating key learning processes. While honors programs may be well positioned to support these learning processes and while transformation may be an implicit goal of honors education, few honors mission statements frame learning goals in these terms (Bartelds, Drayer, & Wolfensberger; Camarena & Pauley).

Working from the premise that honors education is well-situated to make transformative learning a higher-order goal in an era of debates about learning outcomes and metrics of change (e.g., Digby), we examine the personal transformation experiences of first-semester honors students and explore how the intentional processes integrated into these experiences played a role in that transformation. To put this work in context, we first describe the transformative learning models and identify the intentional structures built into the first-semester honors experience.

## **Transformative Learning Theory**

Mezirow originally developed his transformative learning theory from observation of adult learners returning to pursue higher education (*Education*). He suggested that adult learners might face challenges in adjusting to the demands of learning in the college classroom and experience “disorienting dilemmas” as they worked to integrate classroom learning with out-of-class demands. Scholars have found the theory also useful for studying emerging adults in higher education contexts (e.g., Doucet et al.). Like Mezirow’s adult learners, traditional college students adjusting to college-level coursework for the first time are encountering significant disruption caused by normative life events experienced during young adulthood. Since both adult learners and traditional college students are facing disorienting dilemmas in and out of the classroom, the other essential elements of the process of transformative learning—including real-world experiences, critical reflection, and critical discourse—should be similar for both (Mezirow, *Education* and “Transformative Learning”).

From this model, a key challenge for educators working to facilitate transformative outcomes is to intentionally connect learning in the classroom with structures to support the real-world, out-of-classroom disruptions that occur during young adulthood, including changes in close relationships (Keup) and expectations for university life that differ from reality (Kreig). Rather than

just providing information for students, the transformative learning model encourages disruption in the classroom through the integration of critical thought on ideas that reveal difficult truths applicable to the individual's life. For example, educators can assist students in challenging social constructions of taken-for-granted ideas, embracing identity moratorium and the value of questioning personal meaning and purpose. By providing experiential opportunities that are intentionally structured to confront uncritically assimilated assumptions and expectations, instructors can help students develop the ability to think more critically about ideas presented in the classroom, about themselves, and about their place in the world (Dewey; Taylor & Cranton).

While engaging in real-world experiences is crucial, it must be paired with critical reflection and discourse in order to foster transformative learning (King). First, students should be actively involved in a process of critical reflection that includes examining, questioning, and revising perceptions and values that are relevant to their disequilibrium and lived experiences (Taylor & Cranton). Educators can structure their curricula to support students in this process, and they can also promote critical dialogue among students about the issues with which they are wrestling. Discourse is an important component of transformative learning as it enables students to test ideas with others and to understand that they are not alone in the process (Mezirow, *Education*). The power of discourse extends beyond the classroom as students engage in conversations with family, partners, and others who may encourage or discourage their transformative learning process.

Disorienting dilemmas, real-world experiences, critical reflection, and critical discourse give students the tools to shift their frames of reference and ultimately experience transformative outcomes (Mezirow, "Transformative Learning"). Building on the transformative learning theory of Mezirow and others, Taylor and Cranton summarize three domains in which transformative outcomes occur. The first is the understanding that universal truths may not exist and that humans construct meaning based on perceptions and experiences. Individuals who are transformed examine those perceptions more critically and reevaluate their notions about absolute truth and knowledge. Second, transformation can result in the realization that one is one's own person, autonomous and capable of making personal decisions, and in recognition of one's potential for growth and development. A third transformative outcome is being more critical of society and challenging systems of racism, economic inequity, and other social inequalities in an effort to change them. This outcome includes the realization that dominant ideology is not natural or

inevitable, and it can lead to a new desire to make a positive difference (Taylor & Cranton).

As these outcomes indicate, transformative learning is a theory about deep learning that goes beyond the content and knowledge of the typical classroom and results in the development of the whole person (Laird et al.). The learning goals conveyed in the three domains are consistent with what developmental theorists suggest is happening during this stage of a student's development: maturing intellectually into more complex and critical thinkers (Perry), addressing the central crisis of identity vs. role confusion (Erikson), developing competence and autonomy, and forming new interpersonal relationships (Chickering). However, educators seeking to develop an appropriate structure for transformation need to realize that it can be an uncomfortable and risky experience for students at different levels of readiness for the process (Cranton; King).

## **The Honors Program at Central Michigan University**

Central Michigan University (CMU) is a rural, residential university with approximately 27,000 students. The CMU Honors Program's mission statement was designed to identify what honors education will provide (unique educational opportunities and experiences) while also stating its goals: "challenging students to aim higher and to achieve more academically, personally, and professionally for the greater good of our disciplines, our society, and our world." The core values of the program provide the expectations for what honors learning should promote: a commitment to critical thought, scholarly inquiry, and creative expression; respect and appreciation for diverse peoples and ideas in a global society; establishment of high and meaningful standards for integrity and personal aspirations; and becoming an active citizen and prioritizing service for the greater good through both personal and professional paths.

All the primary honors structures in place to support this mission have been developed from best practices suggested in both the NCHC and First-Year Experience (FYE) literature and have been refined with assessment data, program review, and an external NCHC review. Key required components for all first-semester students include a summer orientation and reading assignment, a welcome dinner before the start of the semester, an honors orientation class, a small first-year honors seminar, and an honors residence hall. Each of these elements has been infused with processes that promote

transformative learning outcomes; and these processes and goals are made explicit to students from the start.

The summer reading assignment, for example, challenges students' assumptions about the goals of honors education and indicates the need to make personal meaning of honors rather than accepting their unquestioned understanding of academic achievement. This reading leads into the welcome event, where students are introduced to critical thinking concepts and asked to wrestle with a discussion on epistemology, the nature of intellectual truths, and the role of privilege and power in shaping students' paths to honors. From small group discussions about who will volunteer to complete the class without ever seeing their grades on assignments (the No Grade Plan) to the introduction of the Personal Development Project (PDP), which dares students to stretch while seeking new life experiences in their campus community (Camarena, Lung, & Saltarelli; Camarena, Argall, Kloha, Shepard, & Stoll), the welcome dinner discussions and "Director's first lecture" create disorientation and introduce conceptual tools for students to make meaning of the disruptions that occur in their transition to college. In HON 100 the following week, students are encouraged to embrace identity crisis and moratorium as goals more important than maintaining a 4.0 GPA. Across the rest of the semester, readings, reflections, and classroom activities in HON 100 challenge students to think about how honors core values might have personal meaning in ways that are different from the habitual thoughts most high-achieving students bring to the college classroom in their first semester. Because all first-year students are in the same HON 100 classroom and engaged in the same discussions, they share a common reference point for out-of-class dialogue.

To further foster critical reflection on issues relevant to students' lives, each of the first-year seminars taken as an HON 100 co-requisite is focused around a different complex, real-world issue with an emphasis on critical exploration and not on finding a single correct solution. Because all first-year students are required to live in the same residence hall, discussions from HON 100 and the first-year seminars are brought back to students' meals and rooms where some students coordinate PDP explorations with hall-mates who are members of their HON 100 small groups. Because sophomores in the hall have already been through this same honors experience, with many serving as HON 100 TAs, they are excited to promote ongoing dialogue and support their peers' explorations. Across all these activities and associated readings and lectures, first-semester students are writing reflections that

document what they have been doing experientially while also making personal meaning about how these in- and out-of-class lessons provide new tools for enlightenment and empowerment.

## **The Current Study**

Although a strong and growing body of literature addresses the transition to college, the majority of this work focuses on retention and persistence for those facing challenges while relatively little work focuses on those thriving in their new context (e.g., Holliday; Robinson). Our specific focus is students who are positively transformed during their first semester in college. While the processes linked to transformative learning might be applicable to all students' first-year experience, we examine the application of intentional programming efforts in an honors setting as reflected in students' reported experiences in honors.

Because transformative learning is primarily an internal experience of making meaning, a narrative approach was adopted for this project. A key premise of narrative research in the social science tradition is that the stories people tell about their lived experiences, while they might not always be factually true, are valid reflections of how individuals make meaning of their subjective experiences (Polkinghorne). Collecting and analyzing students' stories, therefore, provides a glimpse into the interior experience of transformation; what led to their transformation and what was transformed are left up to students to define in their own words.

## **Research Goals**

The primary purpose of the current study was to explore the nature and process of transformation as described by students in their stories of first-semester experiences and to compare these processes to those outlined in transformative learning models in order to examine the degree to which they correlate. The secondary goal was to investigate how honors students spontaneously described the role of honors programming that had been put into place with the goal of promoting transformative outcomes. This process-oriented assessment is useful in highlighting which of the strategic elements of the program are perceived to be most effective by students who believe they have been transformed.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants for this study were selected using a nomination procedure targeting students who were “transformed by [their] experiences during [their] first semester at CMU.” All 155 first-year honors students received an email invitation from the honors program inviting them to participate if they believed they had been transformed while all honors program professional staff and HON 100 teaching assistants were simultaneously asked to offer names of students they believed met this criterion. Transformation was purposely not defined in this invitation, but all of the nominated students were given additional information and invited to participate.

This process of nomination by self, TA, and honors program staff yielded a total of 41 potential students for the study. Of these, 22 students agreed to participate in interviews: 27% were self-nominated, and 73% were nominated by others, with little overlap between the two sets of nominations. This process builds on Doucet et al.’s 2013 study by triangulating the sample and giving students an extra opportunity to reflect on whether they had, in fact, been transformed during the first semester even if they had not previously thought of their experience in these terms.

Consistent with the demographic characteristics of the first-year honors cohort, participants were 18–19 years old ( $X=18.45$ ), 77% female (55% campus wide), and 82% Caucasian (76% campus wide). Additionally, 59% reported being from rural communities, and two identified as first-generation college students (~20% of the first-year honors class identify as first-generation).

### Procedures

Students agreed to participate through a pre-screening online questionnaire that included additional information about the project, and then one of two trained student interviewers contacted each student to schedule a one-on-one interview. All the student interviewers had previously served as undergraduate teaching assistants for HON 100, and they were assigned students to interview with whom they had not worked personally.

The interviews were semi-structured and designed to provide participants with an opportunity to tell their personal stories without interference from the interviewer. (See Appendix for the full interview protocol.) After opening



sections to gather background data, students were prompted with: "Starting at the beginning from when you first came to CMU until now, please tell us the story of how you have been transformed across your first semester here at CMU." Interviewers were instructed to avoid directed questions during this section of the interview and instead to rely on active listening prompts to encourage additional details on events, activities, and feelings. After this opening section, the participants were given a series of follow-up questions to check for information that may not have been clear in their open narrative. Sample follow-up questions included: "What about you specifically has been transformed?" "Why do you think you may have been transformed to a greater degree than others?" and "What recommendations do you have for the Honors Program as a result of your experiences?"

Interviews generally ranged in length from forty to sixty minutes although a small number of interviews exceeded an hour. To address Institutional Review Board policies, interviews were not audio-recorded; however, the interviewers were trained to take careful notes and to include quotations of central phrases in the students' own words. In addition to taking thorough notes throughout the interviews, the interviewers were tasked with writing a narrative summary of participants' stories shortly after the interviews were completed. Both the notes and the summary narratives were used in the data analysis.

## **Analysis**

At the most basic level, a content analysis identified how often students specifically referred to elements of the honors program as part of their transformative experience. Categories for this analysis were generated from the data, and labels were tested in discussions with the research team. After final categories had been created, two independent raters coded all of the responses that noted anything honors-related. The kappa for participant references to categories of the honors program was .85, suggesting that these categories were easily distinguishable within the data although the narrative prompt about transformation did not specifically ask about honors.

At a higher conceptual level, the full data set was subject to a more interpretive analysis that identified the types of narrative themes emerging within each interview regarding students' transformative processes and outcomes and comparing them with the transformative learning models that were a guiding framework for this study. In a grounded theory approach to data reduction (Strauss), a series of memos and codes were used to categorize

types of experiences reported in the interviews. Beginning with quotations from the interviews and *in vivo* phrases from the narratives, each member of the research team developed tentative codes that were then tested in group meeting discussions to enhance validity and ensure the dependability of the coding process (Polkinghorne). This iterative process of interviewing, coding, and discussion proceeded until members of the team agreed that final categories were clear and valid representations of the data.

For this holistic level of analysis, the coding began at the level of individual events and experiences, with codes being developed for key elements of the plots in the personal stories (Polkinghorne) and with special attention to what, according to students, was being transformed and what the process of transformation was like. During this process of comparison, codes across multiple participants began to cluster into categories, with refinements and revisions continuing until all of the data had been coded. As a final stage in this analysis, each student narrative was grouped with others where core elements clustered into overlapping but distinguishable overall stories of transformation.

## RESULTS

### Honors as Context for Transformation

The identification of honors structures and activities in the content analysis of students' narratives of transformation is especially significant because the narrative prompt and the interviewers themselves did not initially mention or ask about honors so that references to honors would be spontaneous in student reports. In fact, the content analysis of honors experience was begun as a secondary part of the analysis only after it was clear that all the students were making consistent and direct reference to honors programming structures in their stories of transformation. Because the content analysis has more concrete outcomes and sets the context for what students said were the triggers for transformation, these results are presented first. Rather than presenting the identified codes in order of frequency, we grouped together the categories identified with related items as they would have emerged in the data coding decision tree (Table 1).

Of the participants, 14% talked about the honors welcome event. This activity was significant because it was designed to serve as the formal introduction to HON 100 and to all the pieces of the honors experience: the "Director's first lecture," where transformative learning concepts were

introduced and put into action; small TA groups in HON 100 for extra guidance and peer support; and the personal development project that would be formally posted before the first HON 100 class.

Consistent with this introduction, participants' stories noted the HON 100 class as a whole, the director's lectures, the PDP, and the TA and TA groups. The special significance of the PDP as a challenge-by-choice experiential project was indicated by its identification in 68% of the stories. Whether students referenced the value of the project overall or the impact of a specific activity completed for the project, this assignment was the single most noted catalyst for transformation in the class. Overall, across these specific codes, 87% of student narratives made explicit reference to HON 100 in some fashion, with most stories including codes across multiple categories and connecting HON 100 to other elements of students' narratives of transformation.

Beyond HON 100, 68% of the stories mentioned other honors courses, including the critical thinking first-year seminars and departmental honors sections. Closely connected to in-class experiences, students noted interactions with the honors faculty and staff outside of the classroom 18% of the time.

References to the honors community appeared in 37% of the students' narratives. These comments included both descriptions of experiences with

**TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE OF HONORS STUDENTS IDENTIFYING DIMENSION OF HONORS IN NARRATIVES**

Dimensions	Percent of Students
Welcome Event	14%
Any HON 100 Dimension	87%
HON 100 (dimensions not specified)	64%
PDP	68%
Director Lectures	23%
TA & TA Group	23%
Honors Classes (First-Year Critical Thinking Seminars and Departmental Honors)	68%
Honors Faculty	18%
Honors Community	37%
Honors Residence Hall	68%
Honors Experience (dimension not specified)	73%

specific honors student organizations and more general references to the honors community as a whole. Students more frequently mentioned the role of the social world within the honors residence hall, with 68% talking about the significance of this context for their transformation. Comments again made reference both to specific relationships and activities in the hall and to perceptions of the hall's "special" character overall.

Finally, although most student narratives were explicit about specific dimensions of honors activities and resources in their stories of transformation, 73% of the students interviewed also made more general reference to honors culture or the "honors experience." Although the codes were noted within each narrative as a separate item, it quickly became apparent that the codes were interdependent. For example, learning to embrace identity moratorium was described as a reference to HON 100 content, the PDP assignment, and supportive discussions in the residence hall.

## **The Nature of Transformation**

From the start, the primary goal of this study was to explore how transformative learning models were reflected in students' stories and how students made meaning of both transformative experiences and outcomes, whether related to honors or not. Although transformative learning principles were key to the development of pedagogic strategies and were part of the priming prior to analysis, specific questions about elements of these theoretical models were not directly tested. Rather, the grounded theory methods used for this section of the narrative analysis required the researchers to let the themes emerge on their own in the words and plots described by the students themselves. The analysis distinguished key elements of each story's plot and yielded eight major narrative themes across all twenty-two students (see Table 2).

Consistent with the pattern of findings in the content analysis, repeated specific references to honors emerged as a central element of most students' stories even though the goal of the analysis was not to feature honors. Although the eight themes that emerged from the data reflected elements of the transformative learning model, they did not replicate or group in the same way. The themes were independent enough that they could be identified, but they overlapped with each other and clustered around interwoven threads of challenge and push combined with relationships and support.

## The Role of Challenge and Push

Many of the major narrative themes clustered around the idea of being challenged and pushed both by normative college adjustments and by expectations and activities from honors. As captured in Theme 3, 64% of students indicated that their initial transition to a new environment was a challenge and acted as a catalyst for change. For example, Student #1 was from an all-girls, private, faith-based high school and explained that she felt shocked when she had to adjust from a regimented schedule with uniforms and close social control to an environment with a great deal of freedom and encouragement to explore. Others were challenged when their expectations for the environment did not match reality in either academic demands or social integration and said that this mismatch pushed them to make adjustments leading to personal change.

In addition to being exposed to a new environment generally, Theme 7 reflects the special opportunity for growth that came from exposure to and interactions with others from diverse groups and backgrounds. For example, Student #4 described coming from a more privileged background in an

**TABLE 2. STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION: MAJOR NARRATIVE THEMES ACROSS ALL PARTICIPANTS**

Major Narrative Themes	Percent of Students
1. Encouragement to explore direction & embrace change led to shifting priorities & purpose in life	68%
2. Freedom from constraints prompted students to explore values & pursue passions in process of developing independent identity	68%
3. Transition to new environment & different expectations created contrast & sparked change	64%
4. Confidence, competence, and comfort with self increased through overcoming challenges and forming support networks	50%
5. Relationships provided support, facilitated self-confidence & acceptance, & encouraged involvement	36%
6. Push to branch out and try new things stimulated greater openness to explore ideas & stretch self	32%
7. Exposure to new people & ideas facilitated new awareness of diversity & privilege in society	32%
8. Director lectures promoted movement away from dualism to engage critical thought & think about purpose of education	32%

affluent suburban community and found herself thinking about the extent of her privilege for the first time, and Student #2 said that her first-year honors seminar got her to think about inequality in new ways, inspired her to work on diversity initiatives within honors, and challenged her to alter dramatically her career and life goals. Rather than pointing to a class, Student #9 said that going vegan for two weeks and attending *Rocky Horror Picture Show* as part of her PDP encouraged her to be more open-minded about people who were different from her; she grew to appreciate that the world was bigger and much more diverse than she had imagined in her rural hometown.

As shown in Theme 8, lectures in HON 100 pushed students to consider new ideas and promoted a movement away from dualism to engage in critical thought. The very first lecture of the course at the welcome event was disorienting for some students, such as Student #13 who described feeling “shell-shocked” and a little “intimidated” and who left asking questions like “What’s my place?” Student #13 said that, as the course continued, lectures “gave [him] a different lens to look at lots of important issues.” The lectures gave him not only a new way of viewing the world but also the concepts to help make sense of his changing cognition. As he explained, “Honors has given me new tools to critically think and move away from dualism . . . just knowing about and being exposed to the concept helps.”

In parallel with being challenged to consider new ideas, nearly a third (32%) of participants reported being pushed to branch out and explore in their new campus community, stimulating greater openness to stretching themselves. Student #14 said that his exploration of different campus religious groups gave him new perspectives on faith, while participating in intramural sports changed his thoughts about competition. Student #11 effectively summarized the impact of engaging in challenging real-world experiences that helped her realize that she “could step up to the challenge and overcome it successfully.” In many of these cases, the students acknowledged that without the challenges being presented to them they would not have been so likely to stretch themselves and would have lost the catalyst for their transformation.

More holistically, Theme 2 indicates that students felt challenged to explore who they were and whom they wanted to become. Students talked about feeling a sense of freedom from constraints and expectations that helped them begin working toward their own identity instead of the one given to them back home. Student #10 explained, “Unlike my small town, nobody knows me here and with so many opportunities I can do whatever I want to do without judgment or pressure.” Student #18 echoed this sentiment,

saying, “HON 100 was enlightening because of the freedom it gave me. I realize I can do whatever, there were so many opportunities, and I can look at my values and decide what I want.” For these students, the new environment combined with class discussions about the development of self, identity, and meaning gave them permission to explore their passions and develop their independent selves.

As students wrestled with questions about who they were, independent of others, and what their values were, many of them also grappled with conceptions of their future selves and what they wanted to do with their lives, as reflected in the 68% of participants who reported in Theme 1 that the encouragement to explore direction and embrace change led to shifting priorities and purpose in life. For example, Student #6 said that both the passing of her grandfather and being in the honors program contributed to her first-semester transformation by helping her to question her motivations and to reevaluate her priorities. She explained, “My view on life changed and I started asking myself, ‘Am I doing what I want with my life?’” She decided that she needed to adjust her life values and consequently changed her major and career goals. Other students also made changes in their majors after receiving encouragement to reconsider priorities. For example, Student #8 reported that because of HON 100, “I had a sort of epiphany that I didn’t really want to do the career I was pursuing” and embraced the fact that she would need to change majors, working toward new goals she had never considered in high school. As she explained, though, this transformation was about more than majors because she was also reconsidering her religious tradition, had decided to become vegetarian as part of her PDP, and was determined to place more emphasis on learning and less on working for the grade. As she summarized, “I went from being completely focused on the A to concentrating on what I was learning and getting better as an individual.”

## **The Significance of Relationships and Support**

Even as students reported being pushed and challenged in a variety of ways, they repeatedly emphasized that relationships and support were vital to their process of transformation. Student #9 said that honors “taught me to be proud of my academic drive” and that it “pushed and challenged me to be a better person because I’m surrounded by people who care.” Student #1 also stressed the importance of support, explaining, “I would not be nearly as involved at CMU without the constant pushing from honors . . . it’s nice to have a community of people to push me,” adding that “support is a big

thing for me” and that with the support of the honors community, there are “a lot more experiences that I am going to have.” While these students bring challenge and support together, others more prominently featured the importance of relationships and support as part of the process of transformation.

Some students described the importance of family relationships in moving away to college and reflected on the delicate balance of a desire for both support and autonomy. For example, Student #3 explained that she was struggling with maintaining the support of her “helicopter parents” while being her own person. She was particularly concerned about how they would react to a change in her religious identity, which she had not yet shared with them. Similarly, Student #15 discussed her sense of guilt as she was forging her new identity and independence since she knew that it would hurt her mother not to be needed in the same way.

While evolving relationships with parents were important, the main way that participants received support was through forming new relationships with peers and belonging to a community. Student #22 was initially afraid of building relationships, but when reflecting on his first semester, he said, “I feel confident in the fact that I don’t know what I’m doing, and that’s okay because I have a group of people I can talk to.” Other students noted that relationships formed in the honors community encouraged them to be involved in new opportunities that prompted growth. Student #12 said of the honors hall that “we are all in this together” and that he would “be a completely different person” if he didn’t have the support and encouragement of his hallmates to “try new things with me.” The role that these social relationships play in both challenge and support appears in Student #10’s story where she describes nightlong conversations about HON 100 lectures with other honors students in the residence hall. She explained that it was “so cool to be surrounded by people with so many different opinions” and to be able to disagree and debate while feeling supported by these new friends in the hall.

Successfully meeting challenges and forming support networks not only promoted students’ involvement in new opportunities and openness to exploring ideas, but it also facilitated increased self-confidence, competence, and comfort with self (Theme 4). Student #7 said that the biggest transformation she experienced was how comfortable she had become with herself and the person she was becoming: “I used to be my own worst critic, but now I am not as hard on myself and I have realized I don’t need someone with me holding my hand all the time.” For Student #7, being confident and comfortable was integral to her transformation as she was coming from a high school



experience where she had been bullied. She identified the role of these new supportive relationships in overcoming the “low self-confidence” that had initially followed her to college.

## **Narrative Types**

Our narrative analysis indicated that most themes were present in many of the stories. Some, like the increase in acceptance and self-confidence, occurred in some form in almost all of the stories and were interwoven with other elements of the narrative plot. The research team’s discussions of how themes across stories were similar and different (constant comparative method) prompted a higher-level review to assess whether the full stories of student transformation could be grouped according to major story plot. This higher-level analysis of narrative type found that, although the stories overlapped in several dimensions, the core elements clustered into three distinguishable groups of transformative experiences: developing an independent identity, interpersonal relationships as foundations, and shifting paths and purpose in life. The titles of these narrative types were refined further based on their central focus: Self, Self and Other, and Self and World. A representative summary story, abstracted from a student’s full narrative and followed by a brief discussion to elaborate the core theme, illustrates each narrative type.

*“Self”:*

### *Developing an Independent Identity*

Student #11 used to feel that her small community defined her, but now she is breaking away and developing as her own individual, becoming more confident in herself in the process. She feels that she has more of a path for her life as a result of changing her major and exploring opportunities that she never previously considered, but she is also keeping her options open and figuring out what she wants independently of what others think. Her rural background, paired with honors courses and community support, has helped open her eyes to the many issues facing society and has expanded her view on the world and her place in it.

This group of stories is built around the transformation of self experienced through the development of autonomy and an independent identity. Participants described being freed from the constraints placed on them by the expectations of others, including their friends, family, and community, which

prompted a struggle to become their true selves. For the students in this group (41% of participants), the struggle to become their true selves involved the exploration and development of their own values, passions, and beliefs.

*“Self and Other”:*

*Interpersonal Relationships as Foundations*

Student #7 had a difficult transition to college because of preexisting mental health conditions that made it difficult for her to meet new people and do things on her own; but when she became involved in the honors residence hall, she gained confidence in herself and realized that she was capable of more than she ever thought possible. Building new relationships, especially in the honors community, was the key to developing independence and becoming comfortable with herself, leading her to worry less about what other people thought and to focus on what she wants. She used to have doubts about pursuing her chosen career, but now she is choosing to pursue her interest without second-guessing.

For Student #7 and the other students in this group (23% of participants), the central focus of their stories was the role of relationships as part of both the process and the outcome of transformation. Students were either transformed directly, as a result of forming new interpersonal connections, or indirectly, as a result of having transformative experiences that resulted from building these new relationships. Relationships allowed for exploration and were the foundation for increased feelings of self-confidence and competence, leading to a feedback loop of self-confidence and competence: increased self-confidence promoted new social relationships, reinforcing the process of self-transformation.

*“Self and World”:*

*Shifting Paths and Purpose in Life*

As a first-generation college student, Student #2 found that the transition and first semester were a big shock and did not go as planned. With the help of resources and knowledge from honors, she sought out involvements and experiences that were transformative. She developed a new awareness and appreciation for diversity, privilege, and inequality along with a realization that she had the power to make a difference in the world. As a result of increasing confidence

and feelings of capability in the face of uncertainty, she has become passionate about serving others and working to promote social justice; she has completely changed her career and life goals to focus less on money and success and more on fulfilling her newfound purpose to help others.

Core elements of Student #2's story and other narratives in this category (36% of participants) reflect the emergence of a broadened perspective on the world as participants realized a new sense of their place and potential. From recognition of new opportunities for careers and life paths to an increased awareness of diversity and inequality, these students found themselves reexamining how they thought both about themselves and about the bigger world around them. The differences between their home environments and their new experiences as honors students in college created significant disruption that required new meanings and plans.

## **DISCUSSION**

Our study began with two distinct but interrelated goals: the primary goal was to explore students' experiences of transformation as they related to transformative learning models, and the secondary goal was to assess the elements of an honors program's intentional efforts to promote transformative learning. Although the data coding procedures were designed so that a different member of the research team was leading each task with independent results anticipated, students' narratives combined descriptions of the "honors experience" with the processes and outcomes of transformation to a high degree. Consequently, final coding and sample quotations needed to be integrated in the final presentation of results to avoid repetition. In qualitative research terms, this convergence of themes adds evidence for the validity of the major codes and themes.

### **Transformational Learning Lessons**

While the purpose of this study was not to test any one model of transformative learning, one of the aims was to examine how transformative processes—including disorienting dilemmas, real-world experiences, critical reflection, and critical discourse common to these models—might be reflected in stories of transformation. The results suggest that disorienting dilemmas in a variety of forms were directly reflected in the narratives but that the students made meaning of their experiences in terms of "challenge"

and “push” rather than disorientation. Consistent with student development models, students reported being challenged upon transitioning to college, living in a new environment, encountering diverse people, and confronting new ideas and ways of thinking. Consistent with the language and assignments of the CMU honors curriculum, they also reported being pushed to think non-dualistically, to branch out and engage in new experiences, embrace identity moratorium, and seek their paths and purpose in life even as they worked toward more traditional achievement goals.

The transformative models’ emphasis on real-world experiences was also reflected in the narratives. Rather than addressing standard academic material, students were more likely to mention the PDP challenge-by-choice project or to reference an activity from the project that pushed them out of their comfort zone. Going vegetarian for a month, joining the No Grade Plan, or dressing up to attend the campus-sponsored *Rocky Horror Picture Show* with peers from the hall is not part of the standard curriculum; but providing a class structure to encourage personal challenge outside of the classroom by engaging in such activities helped students to stretch limits and open minds. Even more standard college experiences, like exploring student clubs or attending campus lectures, were enhanced because students acknowledged they might not have done them without the push of the program or course requirement.

While disorienting dilemmas and real-world experiences were essential elements of the process of transformation in the narratives, the concept of critical discourse was less explicit in the way the students made meaning of their experiences and was therefore not directly reflected in the major narrative themes. Students referred instead to the significance of relationships and support in their transformations; they especially noted the role of the honors residence hall in the formation of new relationships that supported their transition and facilitated greater engagement with campus life both socially and academically. Although students framed their experiences in terms of relationships rather than dialogue, their descriptions reveal that critical discourse was happening and was facilitated by the combination of shared coursework and shared residence.

Critical reflection was also a less apparent process in the way the narratives were framed, but it was taking place in all HON 100 reflective writing pieces as well as the “writing to learn” assignments in all first-year seminars. Because we conducted a grounded theory analysis of themes that emerged from the data and not a test of a model, the concept of critical reflection was

probably collapsed or embedded in other themes about new ways of thinking and shifts in priorities and goals. Students also might have taken for granted the critical reflection piece because they were regularly required to debate ideas and to write formal reflections in essays, reports, journals, and creative pieces.

In addition to transformative learning processes, Taylor and Cranton have summarized ways that transformative outcomes might be organized, including deeper understanding of the social construction of knowledge and truth, development of autonomous identities and personal choices for life, and enlightenment about inequality with empowerment to promote social justice. These outcomes are similar to the three overlapping groups of transformative experiences identified in the final stage of analysis, but important differences are worthy of future research.

The development of an individual identity revealed in our study is closely related to the Taylor and Cranton's focus on emancipation from constraints that hold people back from discovering their true selves and developing an autonomous identity. Similarly, shifting paths and purpose in life was a narrative category closely related to the idea of becoming more critical of society as students come to recognize inequality. Narratives belonging to this category described a broadened view of the world and of students' position in that world, including new ideas, paths, and purposes in life, that often included a greater awareness of diversity and a newfound desire to challenge societal systems of oppression and to work for justice.

Despite clear similarities between our students' outcomes and the transformative models, Taylor and Cranton's notion of developing intellectually and critically examining notions of absolute truth did not emerge as a separate outcome. Since the opening lecture of the welcome event includes activities related to critical thinking and challenges students to move beyond dualistic thinking (e.g., Perry), this finding was a bit unexpected. By the end of the first semester in honors, every student knows that knowledge is socially constructed and depends on assumptions, paradigms, and definitions. However, in the narratives, a shift toward higher levels of critical thought was woven into stories as part of the process that leads to the other outcomes. In the CMU honors curriculum, moving beyond notions of absolute truth and dualistic notions of knowledge is the foundation for exploring new ideas, seeing old ideas in new ways, creating a more meaningful self, and seeing the world and one's responsibility to it in new ways. The realization of alternative ways of thinking is core to all the story types and outcomes.

Similarly, although the “interpersonal relationships as foundations” category was a group of transformative outcomes in these stories that was not reflected in the Taylor and Cranton summary, this narrative theme overlaps significantly with the other stories and helps to highlight the central role of interpersonal dynamics in transformation. The emergence of this theme as an outcome indicates that the students placed a special importance on relationships; it also echoes feminist scholarship on identity development, challenging more individualistic notions of self with its focus on engaging with others and learning from diverse points of view (e.g., Willett, Anderson, & Meyers). The fact that 77% of our sample identified as female suggests the importance of considering gender, in all its variations, as a factor in the experiences of transformative learning. The size of this sample, however, limits the ability to explore this topic.

### **Application to Practice**

As the current study was not designed to argue that this particular honors curriculum is better than others and was not intended to suggest that transformative learning should be exclusive to honors education, the pattern of student reports reveal several useful touch points for university educators in any context. At the most basic level, our assessment helped to address whether the intensive investment in coursework and programming for the first semester is worthwhile, especially for students at lower risk for persistence and retention challenges. Both the amount of time required of the staff and faculty and the financial investment required to provide the combination of in-class learning and out-of-class experiential opportunities are substantial. However, our results demonstrate that, beyond strong end-of-course evaluations and persistence to the next semester, intentional programming based on transformative processes and goals can have a substantial impact on student outcomes at a deeper level.

Although other features of the first-semester curriculum were noted in student reports (first-year critical thinking seminars and other departmental honors offerings), the special significance of the HON 100 class in both the content and thematic analyses is noteworthy. Students acknowledge the significance of the content as it provides both intellectual challenges and concepts that connect students’ lives to the honors mission, simultaneously pushing them to use the university as a real-world laboratory for exploring these concepts themselves. Investment in this class has increased over time with a transition from one to three credits, development of a TA program

with small groups to enhance support, and integration of the semester-long PDP activity. The degree to which the PDP wound its way into narratives highlights the special value of experiential learning that connects to both classroom learning and the real-world lives of students. The degree to which a first-year honors orientation class, required of all students, is core to almost all of the transformative narratives serves as an indicator of the importance of the development and assessment of this piece of the honors curriculum.

Along with the challenge provided in HON 100, the undergraduate TAs, small groups, and especially the honors residential community all played significant roles in ensuring that students confronted challenges together and that support was structured and consistent. The CMU Honors Program is embedded in a residential campus community with traditional-age first-year students, and the policy decision to require all first-year honors students to live together in a residential community had its detractors. Earlier assessment and program review data were clear, however, that students beginning their academic careers together in the honors hall were significantly more likely to complete their honors protocols and to benefit from the supports and challenges that came later in the program, e.g., capstone completion, internships, and study abroad. The data verified that, beyond these longer-term outcomes, the potential for earlier transformation is enhanced when students can bring their classroom discussions back to the hall and engage in dialogue with a diverse group of peers in late-night chat sessions or long, lingering meals in the dining commons. Creating structures to facilitate deep discussion and shared activities outside the classroom is an important strategy for promoting the strongest outcomes for positive change, with honors housing presenting a special opportunity (Frost).

Finally, the degree to which student stories referenced the honors experience as a means to inspire a sense of shared culture shows that the first-semester experience sets the norms and expectations for any honors program, regardless of its orientation, which is especially important given the strong set of biases that students of high academic ability bring with them to honors. Because the students and their recent peers had all taken part in similar activities, curricula, and discussions, they shared the program's biases toward personal development and transformational outcomes even as they worked toward different academic and professional goals. The phrases used by the first-year students echo comments of upper-division students as they joke about "embracing moratorium again" while changing majors or "doing it like the PDP" when confronting a new challenge. As students self-author their

personal stories of academic achievement (e.g., Magolda; Barber & King), they are being reminded by both the program and each other of the transformational goals of deep learning and of the outcomes it engenders. This sense of culture then informs the recruitment of the next cohort of learners.

## CONCLUSION

Rather than focus on retention or problems in adjustment to the college environment, our study explored the experiences of honors students who are thriving and being transformed by their first semester of college. The nomination procedure was unique within both the first-year experience and honors literature, allowing the research team to assess the effectiveness of intentional honors programming and to explore how a small group of students describe the process of transformative learning. Twenty-two of the forty-one students nominated on the basis that they might have been transformed during the first semester described themselves as transformed, conveying a substantial amount of growth and a qualitative change after only one semester in college. Probably others are in the process of transforming but have not yet come to think of the experience in those terms, and still others may not have begun the process but will at some point during college. If the lessons drawn from the stories of this first sample hold true, the seeds of transformation planted in the first semester will most likely bloom and grow for many more students later in their college years, and they will have the conceptual tools to guide that transformation constructively.

While these results document that an intentional and intensive effort to plant the seeds for transformation in the first semester can have a profound impact on student outcomes, we are not arguing that this program has the best model or that transformative learning is exclusive to honors education. However, honors programs have the opportunity to both push and support a select group of students by giving them the structure and permission not only to achieve but also to achieve meaningfully, with the freedom to explore majors and paths, to develop awareness of themselves and the world, and to become a change agent for a more just society. In short, beyond supporting the traditional models of academic achievement, all honors programs have the potential to provide enhanced educational experiences that are emancipatory so that students can transform themselves and the world for good.



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## APPENDIX

### Interview Protocol

(script in bold italics / instructions in regular text)

Begin with review of consent form and address any remaining questions before beginning interview.

#### Demographics

Interviewer will introduce him- or herself briefly and state his/her connection to the research. For example: ***Hello, allow me to introduce myself! My name is*** (name of interviewer), ***and I am a*** (year in school) ***at Central Michigan University in the Honors Program, going into*** (concentration of study).

***First, thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this interview; I appreciate your time! You have indicated that you have been transformed by your experiences during your first semester here at CMU. The purpose of this interview is to help me gain a deeper understanding of your experiences.***

Overview: ***I'll start by asking for some very basic demographic information, and then ask you about your high school experiences and who you were prior to CMU. Next, I'll ask you to tell me your story of your first semester experiences, from the beginning up until now. Last, I'll ask you how you think your transformation will impact your future and if you have any recommendations to the Honors Program for how to better facilitate positive transformational learning experiences for future first-semester Honors students.***

***So first, I just need some basic demographic information so we can describe characteristics of our sample for professional audiences.***

What gender do you identify as?

Age?

Year in School?

How do you describe your ethnic or racial identity?

***Before we begin talking about your CMU experiences, it will help me if I have some basic background information. We would like to know anything that is useful in understanding who you were before coming to CMU, such as what type of high school you attended, what your community was like and how it***

***influenced you, what your experience in school was like, family influences, and so on.***

High School Type: (public/private, rural/urban, etc.):

Community:

School:

Family Influences (First Generation college student?):

Whatever else that's useful in understanding who you were before coming to CMU:

### **Story of Transformation**

***OK—now that I have some background information, it is time to start talking about your first-semester experiences at Central Michigan University. You indicated that you have been transformed, so starting at the beginning from when you first came to CMU until now, please tell us the story of how you have been transformed across your first semester here at CMU.***

Probe: Ask the following questions if the student does not answer them when telling his/her story:

- What was your initial transition to the University like? What were some good experiences, and what were some challenges? How prepared (or unprepared) did you feel?
- What were the experiences that were the most important/impactful in shaping your transformation? Why?
- If most experiences discussed were not Honors related: We are interested in learning about how Honors may have played a role in your transformation. Is there anything from your Honors education so far that has transformed you?
- If most experiences discussed were Honors related: Why do you think this is the case? Are there any experiences outside of Honors that have been transformative?

***As we wrap up this section of the interview, I just want to clarify, what specifically about you has changed? What is it about your self that is different when you compare who you are now to who you were before coming to CMU?***

*We know that not everyone transforms to the same extent during the first semester of college. From your perspective, how do you explain why you transformed to a greater degree than some of your CMU peers (both Honors and non-Honors)?*

*Are there any other experiences or thoughts that you would like to share before we move on to the next question?*

### **Future Impact**

*Okay, so we've talked about your story and how you have transformed since coming to CMU. You are a student who has successfully completed your first semester of college and you are continuing on your college journey.*

*Given your experiences in your first semester, how do you feel your transformation will impact your future? In other words, how will your future (both at CMU and beyond) be different as a result of your first-semester experiences and transformation?*

### **Recommendations/Feedback for the Honors Program**

*Part of the reason we are doing this study is to gain insight into what it takes to help future CMU students transform as a result of their experiences in the first semester of CMU Honors. So now it is your chance to give the Honors Program some recommendations about how to provide more opportunities for positive transformational learning experiences for future first-semester Honors students. What feedback do you have as a result of your experiences? What advice would you share regarding how we can improve and enhance the first-semester Honors experience for future Honors students?*

*That is my last formal question but I want to make sure that I give you a moment to think about all that you have shared and to see if you think anything is missing. Remember we really are interested in understanding how and why your experiences have been transformational, what it is about you that has been transformed, and what the implications are for your future. Is there anything else you want to add to help clarify any of this?*

*Thank you so much for your time. Let me just remind you that all of the data is confidential and will not be shared in ways that identify individuals.*

*If you have any questions later on, you can of course contact the research team. We will make sure to send you a summary of results from our analysis! Thank you once again for your time, I really appreciate it!*

