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Editor’s Introduction (Vol. 20, no. 1)

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EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

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Academics are proficient in the art of complaining. Behind closed doors or in faculty senate meetings, the well-honed quibble can be a portal into instant respect and in-group status. From freshman composition through the dissertation defense, critical thinking has nurtured in us the rhetoric of grievance, sharpening its edges until it gleams with a fine luster, enchanting the listener almost as much as the practitioner.

Nevertheless, Richard Badenhausen, despite his impeccable academic credentials, brazenly invited us to abandon the enchantments of grousing and to pursue practical fixes for our problems in honors. His invitation was issued in this Call for Papers:

The next issue of JNCHC (deadline: March 1, 2019) invites research essays on any topic of interest to the honors community.

The issue will also include a Forum focused on the theme “Current Challenges to Honors Education.” 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 posted on the NCHC website <https://www.nchchonors.org/uploaded/NCHC_FILES/Pubs/Shunning_Complaint.pdf?1541382325179>, is by Richard Badenhausen of Westminster College. In his essay, “Shunning Complaint: A Call for Solutions from the Honors Community,” Badenhausen asks readers to consider the weightiest problems currently facing honors education and then home in on one of them, not just to complain about the problem but to “lay out the path” toward a solution.

Badenhausen’s essay is itself a Call for Papers, clearly explaining the kinds of essays he hopes to elicit, ones that take on “intractable, sticky problems that have no easy answers and require complex solutions, strategic thinking, long-term effort, and collaboration with multiple units.” Examples he provides include the need for pathways into honors for underrepresented groups; the prevalence of mental, domestic, and economic challenges faced by our students; the increasing number of AP and IB credits that students bring with them into honors;
legislative agendas that threaten to compromise or undermine honors education; the fact that honors innovations are often coopted by and credited to other organizations; the need to place honors at the center of our campus cultures; and the growing disrespect for the written word. None of these challenges has an easy answer, and many other obstacles in the path of honors also merit substantial consideration in the quest for creative solutions. The hard part is not defining the problems but imagining ways through them.

Of the many responses to Badenhausen’s call, nine are included in the Forum on “Current Challenges to Honors Education.” The Forum is followed by four research essays on honors topics.

Four of the Forum essays address primarily “the need for pathways into honors for underrepresented groups,” the first among Badenhausen’s list of challenges and a priority for the NCHC. Badenhausen’s predecessor as president of the NCHC, Naomi Yavneh Klos of Loyola University New Orleans, devoted her presidential year to promoting diversity, mutual respect, and a shared sense of belonging in honors and in the organization. Her essay, “Congregational Honors: A Model for Inclusive Excellence,” is aptly the first response to Badenhausen’s call for solutions. Her response draws on Ron Wolfson’s book *Relational Judaism* to suggest that honors programs have much in common with communities of faith, where, in Wolfson’s words, “What really matters is that we care about the people we seek to engage.” Yavneh Klos argues that we need to engage a diverse range of students not as guests, who are required to be on their best behavior and who know that they are not fully part of the family or congregation, but as people who belong. In order to make all students part of an in-group, we need to learn, acknowledge, and respect who they are; the responsibility belongs to the congregation of honors to welcome all its members and to respect their individual integrity and dignity. Yavneh Klos offers a range of practical measures that can make a program welcoming, from admissions policies to “grace periods,” but the precondition of all student-centered policies, she writes, is a community of caring and respect.

Like Yavneh Klos, Kathryn M. MacDonald of Monroe College provides specific strategies for meeting the challenge of implementing not just a diverse but a welcoming and accommodating honors program. In “Taking on the Challenges of Diversity and Visibility: Thoughts from a Small Honors Program,” MacDonald emphasizes that solutions to the challenges that honors programs face include, above all, acknowledging the challenges that
Editor's Introduction

students face when they do not come from privileged backgrounds. Monroe is a small college with two campuses—one in the Bronx and the other in New Rochelle—that attract large numbers of Hispanic and Black students, among other minority populations, who lack the support, free time, and resources that traditional students often take for granted. The key to their success, as Yavneh Klos also noted, is getting to know the students personally, so Monroe has developed mentoring and support systems to meet individual needs as well as flexible curricular and extracurricular scheduling. MacDonald also offers strategies for making the program and its students visible across campus.

Sharing the values and goals of both Yavneh Klos and MacDonald, Betsy Greenleaf Yarrison of the University of Baltimore offers in “The Case for Heterodoxy” an interesting trio of strategies for achieving these goals: “radical hospitality, asset-based thinking, and heterodoxy.” She makes the case that European education stressed rationality and an “adversarial model of advancing erudition” that was designed by and for privileged white men, effectively excluding, for instance, women and African Americans. Women, she contends, have adopted the combat model in the knowledge that it is necessary to academic success in higher education and in honors programs, but minority groups have found this model a bad fit and have either been excluded from honors or allowed in only through a back door. “Radical hospitality” would welcome these groups in through the front door by adopting “asset-based rather than deficit-based” thinking, looking not at low test scores, for instance, but at what makes these students unique and what they have accomplished in areas that may not be academic at all. We need to reconsider the orthodoxy of our thinking about honors, much of which is codified in the Basic Characteristics. Instead, Yarrison contends, we should imagine “standards of academic excellence that are not derived from the patriarchal Athenian and Talmudic models” and that welcome a diverse community of students.

Jennie Woodard provides one detailed example of an honors project at the University of Maine that encourages diversity and social justice such as Yavneh Klos, MacDonald, and Yarrison would likely admire. In “The Power of Creation: Critical Imagination in the Honors Classroom,” Woodard describes the challenge of finding a way to “make space for all students to work on a problem of their own choosing and use their imagination to solve the problem while at the same time maintaining structure within the classroom”; her solution is to have “each student imagine and design a television pilot that addresses issues of diversity and social justice.” One student came up with a
sci-fi TV series starring an African American deaf woman. Another created a series about working women of “various races and ages, with at least one transgender woman.” The project engaged both creativity and critical thinking in the opportunity “to find and practice agency” as students brought their own interests and voices to the creation of a project.

Addressing a different but related challenge, Anne Dotter of the University of Kansas takes on Badenhausen’s question about how we should “situate honors education in a culture that devalues the written word, has little time or patience for reflection and critical thinking, valorizes violence against those among us with the least amount of power, and imagines the truth itself as something of little consequence[.]” In “With Great Privilege Comes Great Responsibility,” Dotter advocates accommodating a diverse range of students such as the previous authors proposed, focusing also on the professional necessity of understanding and connecting to people different from ourselves. Dotter focuses not on increasing the diversity of our honors programs but on sensitizing our students to the bigotry and oppression that “others” have experienced in our culture in order to better grasp who they are. She argues that in encouraging the goals of cultural understanding and social justice, honors educators should “intentionally expose[ ] our students to the history of violence and horrors perpetrated against the most vulnerable, thereby helping to interrupt patterns of oppression.” She concludes: “Our willingness to introduce our students to histories of the horrors on which our collective privileges rest and to inspire our students to become change agents may bring us closer to a more just university and more just society.”

Linda Frost of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga takes on the more practical challenge posed by Badenhausen’s question “How should we manage external headwinds created by the dual beasts of concurrent enrollment and equivalency credit awarded for performance on AP or IB exams?” Badenhausen also poses the related challenge of government funding that is limited to courses in a major or leading to a degree, directly threatening funding for honors curricula. In “No Complaints, Please; Just Time to Rethink Honors,” Frost argues that “we cannot simply pretend that these truths don’t apply to our students.” She argues that we need to adapt to these inexorable headwinds by changing the NCHC’s mandate that an honors program or college have a minimum percentage of coursework in honors. We need to stop defining honors as course credits and to see the AP/IB tide as an opportunity to define what we do in new ways and with new structures. We also need to accept that major innovations developed within the NCHC (experiential
education and undergraduate research, for instance) have now been coopted by other segments of our institutions and by national organizations such as NCUR and AAC&U, so we need to get to work on a new set of innovations to define honors. Frost suggests some ways we might get started.

While Frost suggests ways to adapt positively to the rising tide of encroachments on traditional honors curricula such as the prevalence of AP and IB credit for college requirements, Jodi J. Meadows argues for standing firm against this trend even though, paradoxically, her desired outcomes are similar to Frost’s. In “Resisting Commodification in Honors Education,” Meadows argues that in honors we can and should “unpack this transactional model of education and uncover the inherent joy of learning.” Using her honors program at Southwest Baptist University as a model, she addresses ways that we can counteract the goals of good grades, good jobs, and good pay with “joyful, self-directed learning.” We can help students “develop language to distinguish between education as a credential and learning as an opportunity for growth.” Having been trained throughout their pre-college education to see learning as “grades, behavior management, and competition between students,” students experience a new curiosity and pleasure in learning when honors encourages them to choose their own path through college and indulge their own passions and interests. When students have power over their learning, starting with admissions and including their curricular and extracurricular choices, their natural curiosity displaces the transactional model, making them eager to learn, and we should not sacrifice this eagerness by succumbing to new trends toward commodification.

Shifting to another of Badenhausen’s challenges, the essay “Honors and the Curiouser University” by Kristine A. Miller of Utah State University addresses this question: “How do we put honors programs and colleges at the center of the institutional lives of our colleges and universities . . . as units to which institutions look for leadership and on which the institutions depend?” Miller’s answer is “curiosity”: “Through cross-disciplinary programming, innovative reward systems, campus-wide messaging, and broad partnership development, honors programs and colleges can and should lead their institutions in curious collaboration.” Curiosity and collaboration, she argues, are the core of the liberal arts tradition, as evidenced in the frequency of their appearance in liberal arts colleges’ mission statements. She describes numerous specific programs and strategies through which the Utah State University Honors Program “incentivizes and operationalizes a ‘curiouser’ institutional culture” and which can serve as models for other honors programs and
colleges. She contends, “When honors students, staff, faculty, and administrators consider what we can do with and for other entities on campus—rather than what those entities can do for us—we become indispensable institutional leaders.”

Annmarie Guzy of the University of South Alabama takes a step further than Miller and argues that not only should honors programs be leaders of their institutions but the NCHC, through the medium of well-informed faculties, should be institutional leaders throughout the country. In “Faculty as Honors Problem Solvers,” Guzy argues that the NCHC has fruitfully addressed many of the challenges that Badenhausen lists. Honors administrators experience high turnover, however, so the accumulated wisdom about solutions to honors problems tends to get lost. While honors directors and deans come and go in the NCHC and in their administrative roles on campus, honors teachers are more permanent “keepers of institutional honors memory.” The problem is that faculty at member institutions have often not been privy to the discussions and potential solutions that the NCHC has produced through its publications, conferences, online messaging, and faculty development workshops. In addition to developing a strong cadre of dedicated honors faculty, administrators should make sure that teachers have access to the wisdom accrued by the NCHC. Guzy cites monographs and journal articles and other NCHC resources that should be a focus of faculty retreats and study groups. In this way, faculty can be an active part of honors problem solving and leadership on their own campus and beyond.

Moving now into a collection of four research essays, we first encounter suggestions for solving another challenge to diversity in honors: how to welcome transfer students. Going beyond welcoming to supporting transfers students is the subject of “Being Honors Worthy: Lessons in Supporting Transfer Students” by Carolyn Thomas, Eddy A. Ruiz, Heidi van Beek, J. David Furlow, and Jennifer Sedell. At the University of California, Davis, the honors program has provided numerous forms of support: “visible entry portals for transfer students”; “[s]hared course experiences among cohorts of transfer students”; a “clear curriculum that recognizes the distinct requirements for transfer students and their aims within our institutions”; “connections between transfer students and faculty who can open doors to research and success within and beyond the institution”; and “strategies to prevent transfer students from feeling that they do not belong at our institutions.” The authors first present the results of a statistical self-assessment they conducted on the honors program’s success in supporting transfer students,
focusing on admissions, academic performance, and research engagement. Then, they present the results of qualitative assessment through focus groups and the adjustments they made in the program based on the results of this assessment, such as revising their website and changing the GPA requirement. The authors argue and demonstrate that honors educators need to build “a sense of belonging into all elements of our programs if we want our transfer students to feel at home.”

Carolyn Thomas et al. stressed that an important support for transfer students was faculty/student mentor relationships, and the next essay describes how best to develop such relationships between all honors students and faculty members. In “Understanding the Development of Honors Students’ Connections with Faculty,” Shannon R. Dean describes her study at Texas State University that determined the two most important influences on such connections are the “approachability of faculty and motivation of students.” The study used “a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach” in which “the participants reflected back on their first year of college and described their connection with a faculty member.” The study reinforced the validity of previous research indicating that faculty/student interactions are one of the key factors in retention of first-year students and in overall student satisfaction.

We conclude this issue of JNCHC with two important research papers based on recent national survey data. The first is “Creating a Profile of an Honors Student: A Comparison of Honors and Non-Honors Students at Public Research Universities in the United States” by Andrew J. Cognard-Black of St. Mary’s College of Maryland and Art L. Spisak of the University of Iowa. The authors analyze the results of the 2018 Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Survey of 19 research universities with almost 119,000 undergraduate students, 15,280 of whom reported current participation in or completion of an honors program. Following an account of previous related research studies based on much smaller samples of students, Cognard-Black and Spisak present and analyze “side-by-side comparisons of honors and non-honors students on selected indicators in the SERU data set.” Among their interesting findings is that while racial and ethnic disparities are common among research universities, which are “already fairly racially homogenous,” honors programs have significantly greater disparities, and the same is true for lower-income and first-generation students. By contrast, honors programs reflect the general student population in gender, sexual orientation, mental health concerns, and differently-abled students. Other comparisons show
that honors students matriculate with roughly equivalent high school GPAs but significantly higher national test scores than non-honors students, and they subsequently report a higher level of satisfaction, but they express similar motivations for choosing a major. As seniors, the honors students have substantially higher GPAs than their non-honors peers and higher averages for positive “high-impact practices and other meaningful undergraduate experiences.” The authors include in their essay suggestions of how their numerous and detailed comparisons can be useful to honors educators.

The second national-survey-based essay is “Disciplinary Affiliation and Administrators’ Reported Perception and Use of Assessment” by Patricia J. Smith of the University of Central Arkansas and Andrew J. Cognard-Black of St. Mary’s College. Analyzing a survey of 269 participants from among the NCHC’s members, the authors first examine any changes that might have occurred in the disciplinary affiliations of honors administrators during the past twenty years, and then they explore associations between current honors administrators’ academic disciplines and their uses of, as well as attitudes toward, outcomes assessment. The study showed that no significant change in the disciplinary affiliations of honors administrators has occurred in the past twenty years, with roughly 45% in the traditional humanities and another 30% or so in the social sciences. The authors’ primary conclusion about assessment is that “those in the arts and humanities or social sciences were more likely to think that too much importance is placed on assessment and that they would be less likely than those in education to participate in outcomes assessment if it were not required.” Smith and Cognard-Black offer some nuanced discussion of this and other conclusions they drew from their studies, leading them to propose more support and training from the NCHC in the area of outcomes assessment.