

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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In 2019, plans were well underway for the 2020 NCHC conference with the theme “Big Hearts, Big Minds.” Then came January of 2020 and the Corona virus with its vocabulary of social distancing, remote learning, the dangers of personal contact, and the importance of isolation. In addition to upending and redirecting all the conference plans that had been so carefully developed under the leadership of Suketu P. Bhavsar, the new language of COVID-19 was an assault on the very intimacy, connectedness, and close personal relationships in honors that were the theme of the conference.

The virus has been an obstruction to education at all levels throughout the world, especially to teaching and learning that hinge on the intellectual, social, and personal exchange of ideas that are fundamental to most honors programs and colleges. The Forum in this issue of *JNCHC*, in its focus on the conference theme “Big Hearts, Big Minds,” addresses the ideals of honors education and starts in some of the essays to assess how these ideals can survive or even thrive in the new landscape of the virus. While the context of this Forum is the period before the virus or its very early stages, it may be vital in pointing toward the values that honors must continue to cultivate and how to accomplish that goal in adverse circumstances. We are fortunate that the honors educator who designed and led the planning for the 2020 NCHC conference agreed to write the lead essay for the Forum long before our world was changed by the Corona virus.

The following Call for Papers was distributed in the NCHC newsletter and in the previous issue of *JNCHC*:

The next issue of *JNCHC* (**deadline: September 1, 2020**) invites research essays on any topic of interest to the honors community.

The issue will also include a Forum focused on the theme “Big Hearts, Big Minds,” which is also the theme for the 2020 NCHC conference. 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/Teaching_from_the_Heart.pdf>, is by Suketu P. Bhavsar. In his essay “Teaching from the Heart,” he coaxes the reader toward a perception

and practice of teaching that includes our spiritual and emotional, as well as our cognitive, selves. He suggests that honors should lead in a paradigm shift valuing the expression of our whole selves in our connections with students and colleagues. He provides three examples from his own experiences as a student and as a teacher; these stories illustrate that through a careful expression of compassion and authenticity, we may deepen our and our students' experience in the academy. He proposes that becoming a compassionate educator is a skill that can be learned, and he offers some lessons for readers to start on that path.

In Appendix B of his essay, Bhavsar has supplied a list of possible topics to which readers are invited to respond. Other possible topics and questions for Forum contributors to consider might include the following:

- Bhavsar asks his readers to tell their own stories of practicing authenticity and compassion as teachers, so tell yours.
- Respond to Bhavsar's challenge to "contribute thoughts, examples, experiences, successes, and failures" to a debate about why or whether a paradigm shift is what we need in honors.
- Discuss Bhavsar's comment that in his early days of teaching, his kindness "was based on personality rather than compassion." What is the difference, and why does it matter?
- Describe problems—be they practical, ideological, or pedagogical—that you see in Bhavsar's advocacy of compassionate teaching.
- How would it be possible to implement Bhavsar's approach to teaching in our age of assessment and evaluation?

Information about *JNCHC*—including the editorial policy, submission guidelines, guidelines for abstracts and keywords, and a style sheet—is available on the NCHC website: <<http://www.nchc.org/honors.org/resources/nchc-publications/editorial-policies>>.

Six responses to this call for Forum essays were accepted for publication.

Mollie Hartup begins the discussion by suggesting that Bhavsar's recommendation for relating to students as whole people is already the practice of virtually all honors programs and colleges but that honors should specifically explain the benefits of such relationships in order to model them for the whole

campus. In “Teaching as a Whole,” she describes her teaching practices and experiences at Youngstown State University as one illustration of teaching to the whole person. A key factor, she argues, is for teachers to reveal themselves personally as well as professionally to their students; in order to get to know students as whole people, teachers need to disclose their own wholeness. Teachers share many of the anxieties and stresses that their students experience, from handling family crises to creating a balanced life: juggling child-care with the demands of a job, for instance. By acknowledging these realities, teachers give their students a sense of belonging through mutual support and connectedness.

In “On the Value of Being in the Moment in Honors Education,” Lisa L. Coleman of Southeastern Oklahoma State University and Anne Dotter of Johnson County Community College affirm the values advocated by Bhavsar and Hartup. They write that “higher education generally and honors in particular will be more inclusive if educators are able to bring their whole selves to their profession and recognize their students’ whole, complex selves in the process.” These two authors bring to the discussion their ways of accomplishing this goal through the practices of mindfulness, in particular yoga, qi gong, and meditation. They point out that Samuel Schuman also advocated meditation as a means to create “internal balance” in his 2013 monograph, *If Honors Students Were People: Holistic Honors Education*. Coleman and Dotter point to the research studies that have been published since that time supporting Schuman’s views and their own: “The value of framing an honors education around the whole student and not just their cognitive abilities is supported by decades of research published in the past five years.” Mindfulness practices have enabled the authors to be fully present for their students and consequently to lead them toward “more balanced and present lives.”

Annmarie Guzy of the University of South Alabama addresses the importance of respectful and compassionate relationships with students in an ethical context. In “Putting the ‘Human’ into the Humanities,” Guzy applauds the current interest in the ethical treatment of students within the Modern Language Association and elsewhere, but she notes at the same time that this interest indicates the ongoing problem that faculty demonstrate in relating to students as whole human beings. The recent impact of COVID-19 on classroom practices, shifting from face-to-face to online interaction, has revealed a new perspective on this ongoing problem. While many teachers stuck to their regular course requirements or even increased them despite the new stresses that students were facing, Guzy and her colleagues in the English Department

recognized that “students and faculty alike were already suffering from online overload, videoconferencing burnout, and overall mental and emotional fatigue” while at the same time students were “losing jobs, their parents were losing jobs, family members had become ill, and loved ones had died with no funerals taking place.” Sacrificing the educational value of final presentations despite her deep enjoyment of them, she substituted “asynchronous discussion forums” that gave students an opportunity to share their stories, support each other, and express their anxieties through discussion of course materials, all in a context that honored their full humanity.

In “Infusing Critically Reflexive Service Learning into Honors,” Lauren Collins and Michaela Niva of the University of Montana also see honoring the full humanity of others as an ethical issue. They develop this connection in the context of a service-learning course: “When you are aware of injustice but do nothing to address it, it is hard not to be complicit.” In engaging students in meaningful interaction with and service to the International Rescue Committee, they designed a “heart-centered pedagogy” that elicits, sustains, and transforms the wholeness of their students so that students are not only providing service to others but, in the process, receiving an important service themselves. The authors describe the goals and components of their pedagogical approach, which include disrupting the power structure of the classroom and creating space for reflection. They assert that “classrooms are microcosms of the larger worlds in which they exist” and that activist engagement with those worlds is a moral duty, concluding with this assertion: “Service-learning courses offer a physical and temporal space for students to meet, reflect, and engage with power, an important part of contemporary higher education.”

Also declaring the importance of engaging in social justice, Robert Gill of Columbus State University (CSU) begins with this assertion: “In times of social unrest and crisis, most institutions batten down the hatches and look for a safe harbor. However, I believe that we need to sail into the storm.” In his essay “Into the Storm,” he addresses the significant implications of legislation such as the Civil Rights Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, or the Affordable Care Act not just as laws but as paradigm shifts, leading students to address movements like Black Lives Matter not just as current issues but as past, present, and future realities that require sustained analysis and activism. Such serious attention can often be intensely uncomfortable for students and teachers as well as administrators. Gill describes his university’s roots in Jim Crow mandates and culture, CSU having been founded as a segregated college. This knowledge challenged his students’ feelings of loyalty to their

university and made them look at racial injustice as personal. The students could now see also how careful their university had been to hide this part of its history. Gill concludes that “we, as honors college professionals, can lead our institutions and fellow staff members into a new social justice paradigm shift if we look for truth within the truth and if we do not fear the storm.”

In “The Danger Room,” Laura Dickinson of Seminole State College of Florida teaches her students a different kind of fearlessness. She imagines herself as the Marvel comic book hero Dr. Xavier training “Gifted Youngsters” to control their powers in order to “save the world from villainies large and small for the betterment of society and themselves”; she does this by teaching her students the fine art of public speaking. Students have been socialized, she claims, to fear giving speeches, thus effectively silencing their own voices and limiting their ability to change their world. She trains them to trust their voices by creating a “danger room” that, rather than villains and monsters, contains lessons and games for practicing public speech, a space where they can confront their fears, open their hearts, and open their mouths safely. “We need heroes,” she writes, “with big hearts, big minds, and big hopes that they can change the future; helping them find their voices makes these hopes and dreams a reality.”

Dickinson’s essay provides a good segue into the first research essay in this issue of *JNCHC*, in which Megan Snider Bailey argues for the personal, academic, social, and humanitarian value of debate. Public debates in this country are too often shouting matches aimed only at the goal of winning with no regard for the truth, so it is no surprise that students and the rest of us have come to view them with suspicion and disgust. Debate classes too often mimic this kind of competition, but in “Claiming Debate’s Value for Honors Student Learning,” Bailey describes a different kind of debate course that she teaches in the University of Alabama Honors College. She argues that “intentionally structured academic debate facilitates key elements of honors student learning, including transdisciplinary inquiry, critical and creative thinking, and ethical and empathetic citizenship.” Her seminar Moral Forum evaluates the success of a debate based on “persuasiveness, moral reasoning, and use of empathetic dialogue.” Bailey describes in detail the structure, content, pedagogy, assignments, and goals of the seminar—goals that include “the habits of active listening and respect for diversity.” Bailey argues that debate “prompts students to reckon with their assumptions, push the boundaries of their thinking, and develop the empathy requisite for ethical citizenship,” making it a valuable component of any honors education.

While Bailey addresses students' aversions to debate and how to counteract them, the next essay addresses an issue of widespread and long-lasting concern within the honors community: African Americans' aversions to honors at predominantly white universities and how to counteract them. A group of researchers at Columbus State University (CSU)—Cindy S. Ticknor, Andrea Dawn Frazier, Johniqua Williams, and Maryah Thompson—conducted a qualitative study of this problem based on focus groups with high-achieving African American students who chose not to join honors, and they report their results in “Using Possible Selves and Intersectionality Theory to Understand Why Students of Color Opt Out of Honors.” They write: “We discovered a complex disconnect between our recruitment efforts and the identity concerns of our focus group participants that may or may not be unique to our institutional context.” The authors describe previous scholarship on this disconnect, the features of their campus that create particular challenges, the theoretical framework for their study, how they conducted the focus groups, and what they learned from the study participants about the appeals and barriers of their recruitment efforts. Most participants were aware of the CSU Honors College but expressed “concerns about investing time, money, and energy into an endeavor that they might not find valuable.” Students expressed interest when “they could see the connection between their plans for the future and small classes, study abroad opportunities, and research experiences with faculty,” but generally they associated honors with a stressful focus on academic studies to the exclusion of leisure activities, and they did not see honors as having a direct benefit to their career plans. Honors programs need to address these concerns in order to successfully recruit high-achieving African American students.

A research group at South Dakota State University (SDSU) addresses a different kind of diversity problem: the failure of honors to attract students from the full range of disciplinary affiliations, focusing especially on students in the College of Agriculture, Food, and Environmental Sciences. Kayla L. Kutzke, Rosemarie A. Nold, Michael G. Gonda, Alecia M. Hansen, and Rebecca C. Bott-Knutson present the results of a quantitative study in which they surveyed honors and non-honors students from all academic disciplines on their campus. In “Student Perception and Affinity: Establishment of an Institutional Framework for the Examination of Underrepresented Programs Such as Agriculture in Honors,” they reach conclusions remarkably similar to those reached by the Columbia State University research team in their study of high-achieving African American students: that students' perceptions of a

direct link to their career goals are essential along with what the CSU group called “concerns about investing time, money, and energy into an endeavor that they might not find valuable.” The SDSU group reaches a similar conclusion that honors educators need to adjust their recruitment and programming to attract these students reluctant to join honors. After describing the research background on their topic as well as the objectives and methodology of their study, the SDSU group compares perceptions of the honors college among honors and non-honors students. Honors students had been attracted to the program because of the small class size, the honors distinction, and, to a much lesser extent, the research opportunities and independent study. The non-honors students thought that honors would take too much time; they did not understand the requirements; they were reluctant to undertake an independent study; and they did not see honors as relevant to their career goals. The authors see their study as “a starting point for future research on interventions to engage students from academic backgrounds that have been historically underrepresented in honors.”

