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Spring 2021

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On Taking Emerson’s Good Advice: “If We but Know What to Do with It”

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Abstract: In his 1837 essay “The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson offers a challenge that is appropriate for honors practitioners today—namely, to figure out just how good a time this is to be doing the work we do. Honors students, faculty, and staff occupy every part of the institutions we call home, so we should take advantage of our position and of all we know about the measurable value added by our best practices to address the immediate challenges confronting us.

Keywords: value-added assessment (education); occupy protest movement; Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 1803–1882; Wayne State University (MI)—Irvin D. Reid Honors College

Citation: *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 2021, 22(1):59–65

Toward the conclusion of his essay, “The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson makes the following observation:

If there is any period one would desire to be born in,—is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side, and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope; when the historic glories of the old, can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it. (68)

We have come to know this piece of writing as an essay, but it was originally an address that Emerson delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard College on August 31, 1837. There were no honors programs or honors colleges at that time, of course, but Emerson might be offering some honors advice for our time. The point he was making resonates these days when our

lives may seem, more than ever, to be “searched by fear and by hope.” The challenge Emerson delivered is both appropriate and succinct: “This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.” That too is the challenge offered by Christopher Keller in his Forum essay, where he raises broad general questions about honors and boundaries and how we ought best to address the challenges that confront us. What an opportunity we have “if we but know what to do with it.” Echoing Emerson in response to Keller, I address three questions: Why us? Why now? What do we do?

First, why us? The answer is easy and self-evident provided we subscribe to the ideals set out by the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). In its “Definition of Honors Education,” NCHC describes the following among our “Modes of Honors Learning,” the first bullet from “Breadth and Enduring Questions,” the second from “Service Learning and Leadership”:

- Programs confront students with alternative modes of inquiry, exploration, discovery, tolerance of ambiguity, and enduring questions. Coursework often requires integrative learning: both local and global learning with connections across time, genre, and disciplines, not always in classroom situations.
- The major emphasis is community engagement: often a single project or a series of collaborative projects that address real-world problems and through which students acquire practical experience and skills that lead to engaged citizenship.

There is also this from the NCHC’s “Diversity and Inclusion Statement”:

In response to historical, cultural, and institutional restrictions that have limited student access to honors education and the hiring of diverse faculty and staff, the NCHC is committed to modeling best practices in inclusion, and to using inclusive leadership strategies, research, and partnerships with other organizations to help honors colleges and programs pursue honors practices and programs that serve and empower all communities.

Given what we say we are out to do on behalf of integrative learning and community engagement, we should feel compelled to take up precisely the kinds of issues that Keller addresses: social justice, the COVID-19 pandemic, the consequent economic challenges confronting us all, and how we might best “serve and empower all communities.” Why us?—because we have claimed this work already as our proper work.

Why now? Here, we should follow Emerson's advice and find our way clear to imagining how this is a very good time to be doing the work of honors if we but know how to see it that way. His point is not to blink away adversity or conflict; on the contrary, we ought to embrace these as opportunities for understanding how better to put back together things that now seem in danger of coming apart. The world too often appears as an always-already settled matter. Now that conditions have thrown so much into question, we ought to consult our anxieties and fears and to own them as indicators of what we value most and how our values might be put to the test by others, and why. There is no better time to confront students and honors professionals alike "with alternative modes of inquiry, exploration, discovery, tolerance of ambiguity, and enduring questions." There is no better time to be doing our work than now if we but have the nerve to recognize the opportunities that present conditions afford and to persevere with the full knowledge that we have each other to look to for advice, assistance, courage, and support.

The third is the most complicated of the questions I have raised. Given the answers to the first two—that the work at hand is honors work and that no time is better than the present to be doing it—how do we proceed? I will begin with a quibble—more an argument, really. Quibbles are for strangers while arguments one reserves for friends, so I would like to argue in a most friendly fashion with the way Christopher Keller has characterized an anthology of which I am a co-editor, *The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education: New Research Evidence* (Cognard-Black, Herron, and Smith). In his Forum essay, Keller says of a concluding contribution that D. Carl Freeman and I made to the volume that we "imply" a paradigm to the effect that honors is "occupied," as if by seemingly unfriendly agents, and that we must urge our claims for existence "against the skeptics, naysayers, and penny pinchers inside and outside of higher education." That oppositional paradigm, he says, "frames the entirety" of the co-edited volume. I do not believe that this paradigm is the most creative way to address the question of what we ought to do now, nor do I believe that it represents fully the work of the honors professionals who have contributed to the monograph, myself included. While any honors program or college is necessarily part of larger administrative structures and funding is part of those structures, the oppositional paradigm does not prove helpful in seeing things Emerson's way and finding out what to do now.

Instead, I propose, first of all, that honors programs and colleges are in a unique and advantageous position relative to other academic units. Our students, like our faculty, come from across the institutions where we are

housed, beyond the parochial bounds of individual departments or colleges. We are everywhere, not in opposition but in complex relationships and alliances that represent a potential base of strength from which to work. In that way, we are more like a graduate school or a college/university library. We provide a potential benefit that reaches across the institution in terms of student recruitment and retention, faculty development, and curriculum design. The good we do benefits ourselves, of course, but it benefits everyone else too, which is a point we ought to urge as often as possible. Most of the time, most of the students and faculty of honors are working somewhere else—somewhere outside honors. If there is occupying going on, it seems we are the ones doing it. The matter of value added and measurement, which is the topic of *The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education*, arises from the ubiquity of honors, which makes it incumbent on us to assess what we are doing because what we are doing is everyone's business. NCHC's "Definition of Honors Education" states the following (emphasis mine):

Honors education is characterized by in-class and extracurricular activities that are *measurably* broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education. Honors experiences include a distinctive learner-directed environment and philosophy, provide opportunities that are appropriately tailored to fit the institution's culture and mission, and frequently occur within a close community of students and faculty.

If we think it is good to be in honors—whether as student, faculty, or staff member—we ought to take our cue here, figuring out how to demonstrate our benefits "measurably." We make friends for best practices by showing what the benefits are when we apply these practices, particularly now when our outcomes address the most pressing issues.

Keller poses the following good question: "Does honors occupy anything beyond the scope of its own printed pages and, if not, why does or doesn't that matter?" Fortunately, this question can be answered affirmatively through our bibliometric measures and by consulting the bibliographies of NCHC publications, which are filled with accounts of honors professionals and students doing precisely what we say we ought to be doing and showing "measurably" how what we do makes a positive difference. We are indeed being "conjunctive," to use Keller's term. In *The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education*, the authors represent a range of institutional types; they talk about how best to conduct reliable, statistical analyses and then how to proceed effectively in reporting the results; they talk about what they have done to build student

success; they talk about recruitment and retention, how to assess students' performance, how to make the most of honors best practices, and how those practices engage important issues of equity and inclusion. This collection is typical of what honors does in moving honors into the world, and the fact is that we are already there in the lives of the students, faculty, staff, and communities where we are located. Keller asks us to ask ourselves, "who has power, who speaks, who listens?" Based on the available evidence, we have plenty to speak up about, proudly; the better the evidence we marshal in support of our message, the more powerful it becomes, and that is the way to make people listen, especially now.

Our voices are especially relevant now because virtually every aspect of honors' institutional practice directly engages pressing, current matters relating to social justice and life during the pandemic. Not just teaching about the issues that confront us matters now: what also matters is being mindful and intentional about what we are doing or ought to be doing; how we assess and report our practices relative to the announced goals of our institutions and of NCHC; and how these goals relate to the pressing issues that occupy so much of the national attention. Now is a fine time to be called to our work, and it is no time for idlers, as Emerson maintains:

Of course, he who has put forth his total strength in fit actions, has the richest return of wisdom. I will not shut myself out of this globe of action, and transplant an oak into a flower-pot, there to hunger and pine. . . . (61)

Emerson was clear on the necessity of acting and of measuring the value added by our actions. "[T]he final value of action," he told his listeners, "like that of books, and better than books, is, that it is a resource" (62). We become wise by measuring the fitness of our actions as a resource, a point for which Emerson argued in the context of our native intellectual culture. "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe," he told his audience (70), addressing himself to the making of the *American* scholar. So, when it comes to that "resource" better than books, he is talking about and to scholars of the native here-and-now; it all comes down to the question of proper duties, which "may all be comprised in self-trust" (63).

If self-trust is a matter of confident, informed residency on our own native ground, I wonder how well we actually know that ground in honors, how fully we know all the studies we have produced that fill the pages of NCHC bibliographies and how able we are to use what we know. Patricia J. Smith, in her study of program assessment, discovered something interesting:

Despite the regularity that directors and deans are reporting that their programs are participating in discussions of outcomes assessment as well as reporting that they are prepared to interpret evidence and implement changes, only 31 percent say that outcomes assessment data are actually being used to guide the majority of program changes. This finding demonstrates that honors deans and directors are struggling to apply the skills they have to “close the loop” and effectively apply assessment practices for the process of continuous improvement. (37)

This study gets back to Keller’s crucial questions about who has power, who speaks, and who listens. Smith’s results lead one to ask whether we are listening adequately to ourselves and applying our good advice or instead ceding power to others and just letting events unfold. “Free should the scholar be,—free and brave,” Emerson advises, and self-trust is the means to that good and active end (65). The danger is getting so caught up in the swirl of all that has happened and is happening—all the unexpected troubles coming at us—that we surrender our freedom unaware.

We should be mindful of the native position that honors occupies, belonging not to any one department or school but to the students—the scholars—that we represent, just as we are scholars too; that is a position of ecumenical freedom and credibility to speak and act from—with one final piece of advice from Emerson: “The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances” (63). He is urging us to act out of self-trust in what we know to be true—“facts amidst appearances”—and not to wait for an invitation, not first writing another article, or proposing another conference session, but doing something now, in the world, Zooming into that committee meeting on Monday and offering solutions that colleagues might try, addressing problems that we know how to solve because we have solved them already, demonstrably and measurably. This kind of action will require homework so that we know what honors has to say about the problems at hand, but that is no difficulty. After all, we are scholars.

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