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Spring 2021

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“Mad and Educated, Primitive and Loyal”: Comments on the Occupations of Honors

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Abstract: This essay examines the scope of honors scholarship and its role in creating and contributing to meaningful dialogue among practitioners. The author explores how scholarly contributions of honors educators cross boundaries to occupy the social, cultural, political, and economic conversations that shape lives and transform communities. Pointing to socio-political crises of 2020, the author posits that the conjunctive nature of honors discourse satisfies an expedient need for exploration and questioning, and he further considers how honors scholarship might incite positive change in and beyond honors curricula and scholarly record.

Keywords: higher education—research and scholarship; Occupy protest movement; COVID-19 pandemic—teaching and learning; Black Lives Matter movement; East Tennessee State University (TN)—honors college

Citation: *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 2021, 22(1):3–12

Hang your collar up inside
Hang your dollar on me
Listen to the water still
Listen to the causeway
You are mad and educated
Primitive and wild
Welcome to the occupation.

Here we stand and here we fight
All your fallen heroes
Held and dyed and skinned alive
Listen to the Congress fire

Offering the educated
 Primitive and loyal
 Welcome to the occupation.

—R.E.M. “Welcome to the Occupation” (1987)

During the spring and summer of 2020 as I was pondering the focal point of this essay, a common refrain occurred from friends, colleagues, politicians, and pundits that went something like this (I paraphrase): “We’re now seeing the greatest public health crisis since the Spanish Flu in 1918, the greatest economic disaster since the Great Depression in 1929, and the greatest protests and social unrest since the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 60s all converge on us at once.” Time will tell whether these historical comparisons are appropriate and accurate, though they certainly feel so at the moment. Consequently, for a time at least, it seemed inevitable to me that this piece would somehow address honors education in the midst of this watershed moment and that I would focus on one or more of these crises, particularly as they play out in budget reductions, pedagogical approaches to and teachable moments about social justice generally and Black Lives Matter specifically, or perhaps teaching honors students virtually in the age of COVID-19.

I confess: for a short time it felt almost as if I would be irresponsible if I didn’t directly tackle one or more of these issues in this essay, so I began a pathway back to a couple of NCHC monographs to help me chart a course: *The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education: New Research Evidence* (2019) as a means to think strategically about how to defend honors in the midst of what appeared like inevitable COVID-related budget cuts and *Occupy Honors Education* (2017) as a means to revisit recent thinking about honors education as a force that works against economic injustice, systemic racism, and anti-democratic movements. Both are well-conceived and well-written texts that include a variety of important voices, and I was correct that they would offer much food for thought in our current context.

As I began reading these monographs, however, I noticed some interesting juxtapositions of ideas and arguments that I did not expect, juxtapositions that caused my thinking to pivot, if not tumble upside down. These juxtapositions hinged on the concept of occupation. For months I had been thinking about how a pandemic, economic disaster, and social unrest were fully occupying my attention and my time as well as my concern as a citizen, parent, supporter of social justice movements, and, of course, honors educator. The juxtapositions I found in these two texts, however, framed my perspectives

differently and posed new questions in my mind: Rather than ask how these various crises in 2020 will occupy the work of honors educators like myself and others, how will honors educators do work that comes to occupy these crises? How will the work, especially scholarly work, of honors educators move into and occupy, i.e., assert power and influence onto, new social, cultural, political, and economic domains? What does the history of honors scholarship tell us that helps explore this question? The distinction between what occupies honors and what honors occupies is more than a play on words, though it is a subtle distinction at first glance. As I flesh out the distinction, I hope to raise questions and conversations about the “occupations of honors,” that is, about why and how honors scholarship enters into and occupies conversations and arguments (especially those related to crises and events) in ways that are productive and beneficial, problematic and damaging, or perhaps even benign and unnecessary.

To begin developing this line of thinking, let me provide an example of the kinds of juxtapositions I discovered in the two monographs that sparked my initial question about the occupations of honors. Three passages from three separate chapters serve as a proper jumping off point:

What we want to know is the *measurable* difference made by honors programming; we want to determine which specific practices contribute to differences in the performance of comparable honors versus non-honors students, eliminating as many alternate explanations as possible. Otherwise we will find ourselves without a compelling answer to the objections that honors students are simply good students to begin with and that they would do well no matter what, honors or no honors, which makes justifying our existence at budget time a great deal harder. (Herron and Freeman, *The Demonstrable Value*, 258)

To occupy honors education is to practice and theorize in the manner of the Occupy Movement itself. . . . In doing so, it aims to overturn systems of oppression masked as agents of democracy. Similarly, if honors understands itself as a laboratory that pushes the university forward, then this call to occupy honors education is about much more than simply creating innovative course content; rather, it demands that honors actively re-imagine the entire context and structure of university education. (Stoller, *Occupy Honors Education*, 26, 10–11)

The argument I make here is that each of us in honors in America is naïve if we believe that honors does not have to change integrally, significantly, if we are to continue to be productive players on the world stage as well as on the campuses of our home institutions. . . . [F]or social justice to exist, diversity, equity, and inclusion for all must become what we in honors are about, centrally, obsessively, perennially. This has to be our mission, the dawn of our new morning. (Coleman, *Occupy Honors Education*, xiv)

In the first passage, Jerry Herron and D. Carl Freeman ask a question that frames the entirety of *The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education*: against the skeptics, naysayers, and penny pinchers inside and outside of higher education, how do honors educators marshal the evidence and construct the argument that show honors as value added for honors students and for institutions themselves? In this context, Herron and Freeman imply that, in terms of control and power, the larger institution occupies honors; it requires accountability, exercises control, and has the ability to offer support to an honors program or college—or, of course, to paralyze or shut it down. The economic and educational values and imperatives of the larger institution impose their will on honors, putting honors programs and colleges in defensive positions that require justification. Honors is occupied in this instance.

The second passage offers a contrasting portrait of honors. According to Stoller, honors is similar to the Occupy Movement itself; it has the potential to occupy the larger institution by functioning as an occupying force of resistance with the power to alter the institution profoundly. Honors can redress power imbalances by razing and rebuilding the “context and structure” of educational missions and practices. Unlike the argument by Herron and Freeman about demonstrating “value added” to those who doubt the role of honors in higher education, Stoller implies that honors might just make the need for that argument moot altogether. Honors in this configuration is no longer a different or undervalued educational endeavor that needs justification; it justifies itself by way of enacting systemic change that reaches into all corners and crevices of the institution. A reimagined honors, for Stoller, spreads outward to occupy institutions of higher education holistically and alters them fundamentally across the board.

Finally, in the third passage Lisa L. Coleman argues for a different and grander form of occupation than Stoller’s. Coleman understands honors to already occupy a “productive” place on the “world stage,” a place where honors can and should turn its focus “centrally, obsessively, and perennially” to

social justice through diversity, equity, and inclusion advocacy and initiatives. Although a compelling statement worth considering, Coleman’s call to make diversity, equity, and inclusion the central mission of honors interests me less here than what it suggests about the occupations of honors. In this instance, social justice—by way of diversity, equity, and inclusion advocacy—is not something that simply occupies the work of honors educators; Coleman wants honors to occupy—to move squarely, fully, and unequivocally into the domain of social justice and the various conversations, initiatives, and efforts focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The arguments by Herron and Freeman and by Stoller involve two main entities: institutions of higher education and the honors programs or colleges that reside within them. Herron and Freeman imply that the larger institution occupies honors; Stoller suggests that the opposite is possible. Coleman’s argument, however, takes readers well beyond these two entities onto nothing less than the metaphorical “world stage.” On this stage, honors not only occupies new territory but also occupies a position of power that warrants analysis. In order “for social justice to exist,” Coleman writes, we in honors must put all our energy into diversity, equity, and inclusion. While I do not believe this claim to be true—that the existence of social justice somehow falls under the sway of honors and its renewed central mission—it says much about the potential, or desire, for honors to occupy spaces and discourses taken up by diverse other stakeholders and occupiers. Coleman assumes that honors can be, must be, and is accepted as a major player in and primary occupier of social justice as a cultural and political as well as social project.

The juxtapositions I discuss among these three passages provide merely a small sample on which to ground a few comments on the occupations of honors. In writing the lead essay in this forum, I am not so much making a detailed argument as I am being purposefully provocative about a concern for the ways that honors expands into and occupies new social, cultural, and political territories. I am not suggesting that any of these territories are or should be off limits per se or that we must identify strict boundaries demarcating what honors can and cannot address in its conversations, goals, and missions. Rather, I am interested in exploring concerns about what movement into and occupation of these kinds of territories does not only to honors but to those territories themselves and other stakeholders who occupy them.

I conclude here by presenting three takeaways and associated questions about the occupations of honors that I hope facilitate further conversation:

1. Herron and Freeman as well as the others who contributed to the pages of *The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education* offer insights on and strategies for showing the value added of honors in higher education contexts that require quantitative and qualitative evidence to justify their existence. Simultaneously, though, honors educators rightly seek to demonstrate the value added of honors in other ways: namely, by contributing to conversations about the most pressing issues and events of our time. In this latter sense, honors is conjunctive. Its scholars and practitioners want to connect honors education to the grand challenges of the day, such as social justice movements that are much bigger than honors itself. Although this stance is understandable and commendable, caution needs to be raised in terms of both how these issues and events occupy honors and how honors occupies them. As the convergence of COVID-19, economic recession, and social unrest continues to pull at the seams of our lives, communities, and institutions—sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse—I think we all foresee a litany of future honors conference presentations, webinars, articles, and monographs that are conjunctive, drawing connections between “honors and *fill in the blank*.” That is, we are likely to see a host of new work that focuses on topics like “honors and Black Lives Matter,” “honors and mental health in the COVID-19 era,” “honors and the economic downturn,” “honors and virtual teaching,” or “honors and epidemiological research.” When these current issues, events, and challenges occupy honors, how will they inform, challenge, and change the work we do? On the other hand, when honors occupies them, how and when does it maintain healthy, respectful, collaborative, and realistic interactions with the many other individuals and groups who are also invested in and committed to them?
2. A separate but related point concerns the conjunctive nature of scholarship in honors. When honors occupies the important issues, events, and challenges of the day, is honors contributing to a conversation in meaningful ways, and who else is involved in such conversation? I understand that Coleman’s “world stage” metaphor is a bit hyperbolic, or at least it should be, but it raises an important question: Is honors really on any stage—regardless of the stage’s and audience’s size—or are we seated around a metaphorical table with others? I do not see any inherent problem with honors trying to occupy certain kinds of discursive territories when done properly, collaboratively, and respectfully

with other stakeholders. However, we need to ask a series of essential questions: Is honors alone on a stage with an audience of empty seats? Is anyone listening to those of us in honors when we talk about the pressing issues, events, and challenges of our time such as social justice, mental health, diversity and inclusion, or even virtual pedagogy? Are we even arguing productively and moving conversation forward among ourselves? Finally, NCHC conference presentations, journal articles, and monographs are filled with citations of writers and scholars whom we would not necessarily associate with honors, but do the scholarly contributions of honors educators affect and inform those outside of honors or only those who work in honors education? How and why might it be important for honors scholarship to make a lasting and visible impact outside our own presentations, journals, and books? How much are we dialogic and how much are we monologic? Does honors occupy anything beyond the scope of its own printed pages and, if not, why does or doesn't that matter?

3. In "The Professionalization of Honors Education," Patricia J. Smith uses a four-stage developmental framework created by sociologist Theodore Caplow in the 1950s to explore honors professionalization and the controversies surrounding honors program certification, a topic that raises voices at any NCHC meeting. Smith, for example, writes:

Without a nationally accepted instrument to be used in a process of certifying honors colleges, the Basic Characteristics as a code of ethics cannot be enforced within the honors community. The desire by some to require enforcement has resulted in what Caplow (1954) described as the fourth step in the evolution to a profession: political agitation 'to obtain the support of the public power for the maintenance of the new occupational barriers.' (13)

In a counterargument, "Requiem for Certification, A Song for Honors," Jeffrey A. Portnoy suggests that Smith's use of Caplow as well as her take on NCHC's history are fraught with errors, arguing vehemently against any form of certification as evidence of professionalization. For Portnoy, NCHC and honors educators have always already been "professionals," as evidenced in honors scholarship:

People engaged in honors at the collegiate level are not amateurs; honors as an occupation and discipline is professional. I

believe that the most profound and compelling evidence is to be found in NCHC's publications and the scholarship, intellect, and commitment they present to readers. (39)

Although I agree with Portnoy, his remarks raise questions that connect with the issues that drive this essay. Honors educators do have honors occupations (in this case meaning “careers”), and they are professional with or without a formal certification of their programs and colleges. What role, though, does honors scholarship really play in our occupations as honors professionals? Scholarship in most professional organizations typically does have strict “occupational [boundaries and] barriers,” to use Smith’s words, in the pages of their scholarly journals. In my own area of English studies, one sees these boundaries when thumbing through the pages of, say, *PMLA*, *American Literary History*, or *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*. Contributors to these journals—and journals and monographs in any professional area—understand clearly the boundaries and parameters that must frame their work. Does honors have any boundaries, and are those of us who contribute scholarship in honors free to let honors roam and occupy any territories we wish? If so, does this highly conjunctive, free-ranging, nature of honors scholarship help or hinder the ways we conceive of professionalization in honors? Does honors sacrifice depth of scholarly engagement for the sake of greater horizontal breadth?

I recognize that my three takeaways and associated questions are not mutually exclusive, that they intersect and mingle with each other. If there is a common thread that runs through them, and this essay as a whole, I hope it connects back to where I began: R.E.M.’s song “Welcome to the Occupation” and snippets of its lyrics that inform the title of this essay: “‘Mad and Educated, Primitive and Loyal’: Comments on the Occupations of Honors.” The song offers an ironic, and purposefully ambiguous, take on the undue and imperialistic influence of the United States in Central and South America in the 1980s (and prior to that, of course), offering lyrics that strategically confuse when and who is speaking, the occupier or occupied. I do not intend to draw a strict parallel between the occupations of honors and the colonial occupations of nations. They are not the same. The occupations of honors, however, particularly in its scholarly work, do necessitate a close look at power, influence, boundary crossing, change, and exchange. Not only should

we ask who is the occupier and who is occupied in such contexts, but also who is constrained, who has power, who speaks, who listens, who is free to leave the occupation at any time, who is forced to stay—or perhaps more colloquially, what occupational contexts situate some as mad, some as educated, some as primitive, and some as loyal.

We in honors are always already a bit mad and educated, primitive and loyal, but do we know when these traits are a blessing and when they are a bane as we inevitably seek to push against boundaries and occupy more? When we move into and occupy new scholarly conversations as well as new social, cultural, and political domains, do we recognize how and when we are welcome and how and when we are, instead, simply welcoming ourselves?

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