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Andrew Martino

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Territorial Games: Honors, Outreach, and Collaboration

ANDREW MARTINO

Salisbury University

Abstract: This essay explores and expands the boundaries by which honors is defined and defines itself. By opening a path toward a more expansive and public perception of honors, the author argues for emphasis on the public good as a key element in honors discourse and the broader dissemination of its theories and practices. Drawing from characteristics of the public intellectual, the author encourages honors practitioners to resist hyper-professionalization and insularity in favor of more open and collaborative practices.

Keywords: higher education—theory & practice; public intellectual; civic engagement; critical pedagogy; Salisbury University (MD)—Glenda Chatham and Robert G. Clarke Honors College

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Christopher Keller’s thought-provoking lead essay brings to our attention some of the many challenges that honors education faces as it attempts to situate itself and its place in higher education in the wake (or in the midst) of the COVID pandemic, social and racial injustices, and economic upheavals. Combined with the Trump Administration’s sinfully slow preparedness against a global pandemic as well as the infrastructural failures in Texas during the recent storms in the winter of 2021 that ravaged much of the state, the need for competent, service-minded professionals is painfully apparent. Added to these difficulties, we also experienced an attempted coup on January 6, 2021, when the United States Capitol was stormed by rabid supporters of President Trump. The events of January 6 demonstrate some of the systemic failings of education in the United States in that thousands of insurrectionists could not tell truth from lies, conspiracies from fact.

Through a series of rhetorical questions centered on three key readings, Keller opens a path for us to consider the importance of honors from various angles. I am particularly struck by his articulation of the concept of occupation as demonstrated in the following:

As I flesh out the distinction, I hope to raise questions and conversations about the “occupation 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.

I intend not to analyze or interrogate Keller’s questioning but rather to expand upon the nuances of his overall thesis and explore a path he has opened. Keller’s essay led me to rethink and reconsider some key concepts as we apply them to honors: specifically, the intellectual’s role in academe as well as society. As context for this concept, I want to further open up the meaning of “occupation” and to unfold the division in which we find ourselves when discussing education writ large. I am interested in exploring and expanding the boundaries by which honors is defined and defines itself.

What concerns me is a possible perception of the insularity and elitism of honors. My criticism of honors is not with its practice nor with its basic philosophy of and appreciation for interdisciplinary education. Honors has enriched educational practices and theory in immeasurable ways. What we do undoubtedly adds value to the educational experiences of students, faculty, staff, and institutions. Instead, I am critical of our slowness to share these achievements on a larger stage, to join a bigger conversation beyond honors. That conversation should not be limited to educational theory and practices. I suggest that in addition we pivot our focus toward more public-facing outcomes and that we work to solve real-world challenges through greater collaboration with non-honors entities. We may begin by rethinking the role of students and their place in society beyond honors communities. Moreover, since the very concept of honors can be perceived broadly as elitist and exclusive, it may be time to rethink our use of the word “honors” itself.

The social function of the student in contemporary higher education has changed dramatically over the past several decades. With funding for public education slashed and the general cost of higher education skyrocketing, we have seen a shift in the emphasis of education toward a more utilitarian, skills-centered approach. Educational theory and practice today emphasize job readiness and the mastery (whatever that means) of key competencies.

There is nothing wrong with this trend as long as we also hold onto the big picture: education ought to be about the role each of us plays as a global citizen in an increasingly complex world. We ought to be engaged in the ever-evolving construction and stewardship of the social contract, and our roles as educators and students should reflect this commitment. In the section “The Intellectuals” from his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci makes the following declaration: “All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals” (9). Like Gramsci’s intellectual, the function of the student, as well as that of teachers, administrators, and professional organizations, continues to change, and not always for the better. Career readiness and reliance on a skills-based set of outcomes typically determine the how and the why of higher education, and with the rise of specialization in the disciplines and the decline of the humanities, we have failed in our basic charge: to educate. Instead, we are in the business of training specialists and future technocrats. I am not suggesting that honors education plays the role, quite the opposite. Although honors has increasingly made room for STEM and pre-professional disciplines that call for specialization in their philosophy and practice, we are still engaged with the world of ideas and practice. What I am suggesting here is that we do not promote this world of ideas widely enough. Honors, like higher education across the board, needs to re-envision the student, but it also must adhere to its basic set of principles: e.g., close reading of primary sources; small, discussion-based classes; undergraduate research; and above all, interdisciplinarity.

Following Gramsci’s lead, Edward W. Said believes that the true ability to bring about change in the world rests on the shoulders of public intellectuals and not on academics as such. The United States has always distrusted such figures, even viewing them with contempt, as displayed by the media and by some academic intellectuals themselves. Likewise, at nearly every recruiting event I hold for my honors college, I am met with reluctance on the part of candidates to engage and join honors. The two most frequent reasons that potential students give are that honors is “more work” and that they do not view themselves as “honors” material, despite undertaking challenging curricula in high school and engaging in a variety of extracurricular activities.

We need to do a better job of explaining to the outside world exactly what honors does and why. Frank Bruni’s 2015 *New York Times* op-ed column titled “A Prudent College Path” is a resonant example of the fine line honors occupies between exclusivity and inclusivity. We must strive to occupy a larger space in the public imagination and sluff off a perceived aura of elitism that

articles like Bruni's make. Honors programs and colleges would do well to stop promoting themselves as providing a private college experience at public colleges and universities. Instead, let us be the thinktanks of institutions and double down on the conception of honors classrooms as pedagogical and scholarly laboratories.

Honors is the locus where interdisciplinarity and emphasis on civic engagement come together. I call on us to resist the momentum toward specialization and professionalism and to reembrace a life of the mind that intellectuals like Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil embody. I am not arguing, however, for a return to traditional education where we celebrate the life of the mind for only the privileged few; the traditional role of the university is filled with potholes of privilege. As bell hooks reminds us, "If we examine the traditional role of the university in the pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information, it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom" (29). We can engage in the pursuit of freedom and the sharing of knowledge and information while at the same time expanding our reach to those we have historically neglected. This reach should include working with non-honors audiences whenever possible.

Just as many of us resist the pull toward the professionalization of honors, we should also resist the hyper-specialization of the disciplines. Edward W. Said argues in *Representations of the Intellectual* that "Specialization means losing sight of the raw effort of constructing either art or knowledge; as a result you cannot view knowledge and art as choices and decisions, commitments and alignments, but only in terms of impersonal theories or methodologies" (77). When we come from different disciplines, what we learn from each other is often an enriching and thought-provoking experience. What we take away from the work of honors enables us to become more attuned to and mindful of the world around us. Said goes on to state that "Specialization also kills your sense of excitement and discovery, both of which are irreducibly present in the intellectual's makeup" (77). Placing more emphasis on the training of our students as potential public intellectuals—as young scholars working to solve problems that require an interdisciplinary perspective—could go a long way toward occupying a larger space. Honors can take a greater lead in this type of educational practice, tying it more deliberately to national fellowships and community engagements that are mapped onto classroom experiences and thesis projects.

In her book *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak examines the existential crisis literary studies, particularly the field of comparative literature, has been undergoing. Spivak's argument is a call for increased collaboration among the disciplines, a renewed commitment to the "crossing of borders." Through this collaboration, Spivak argues, comparative literature will be able to reinvent itself and transform area studies. Spivak points here toward a possible model for honors to follow. She does not claim that comparative literature is a dying discipline, just as I make no such claim about honors, but she does point toward a way for comparative literature to evolve, reverse a shrinking student body, remain current, and stay relevant. The conversations taking place in honors for the better part of the last decade resemble those that took part in comparative literature two decades ago—conversations that are at times uncomfortable but necessary if we are to evolve.

My argument rests on the hypothesis that if we remain insular, we may find ourselves fighting against an even stronger perceived elitism. We must look beyond our own backyards and engage with the wider world, both in academe and beyond, if we are to remain relevant. We must seek to expand our intellectual and social affiliations. A first step would be for NCHC to work more closely with the regions, providing a more united front against the perceived elitism that has been associated with honors. Greater community outreach, events that are more open to outside audiences, and conferences with a sense of community and social justice, such as the Maryland Collegiate Honors Council's 2021 conference with the theme "Black Lives Matter" or the NRHC's past conference activities in service learning, are opportunities on which we should capitalize. Emily Walshe's groundbreaking bibliometric study in a recent *JNCHC* (vol. 21, no. 1) is another step toward engaging with the world outside honors: this study is a watershed moment for thinking about how honors scholarship is perceived both inside and outside our communities and how we might occupy a more global space.

Honors cannot afford to play the same territorial games that the disciplines currently play. We have witnessed the drastic decline of the humanities in favor of specialization and professionalism in higher education, and we are the poorer for it. Let us construct a new narrative, with education writ large, about what it means to live the life of the mind in our contemporary world. Returning to Gramsci, I argue that we should also reexamine the social function of our students and faculty in honors, rethink the formation of the student through an honors lens, and share that philosophy and practice widely without the constraints of boundaries. Let us occupy, in the most holistic sense

possible, a place where the life of the mind can be valued and contribute our own change to an ever-changing world.

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The author may be contacted at

apmartino@salisbury.edu.