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Keeping the Faith: NCHC's Readers and Writers

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Abstract: Honors advocates and scholars should pursue transdisciplinary inquiry to overcome traditional notions of well-defined knowledge boundaries. This essay examines the publication record of the National Collegiate Honors Council beyond its immediate utilitarian value as a means for communication with its members. Citing usage and metrics, the author suggests that current and past literatures that examine the enterprise of honors, its occupation(s), and what occupies its practitioners are being accessed and integrated beyond honors at an exponential rate. As NCHC publications continue to push beyond the boundaries of honors, the author encourages readers to engage more fully in NCHC-sponsored discourse by submitting manuscripts for publication.

Keywords: academic discourse; scholarly publishing; NCHC Monograph Series; *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC)*; Perimeter College at Georgia State University (GA)—Honors College

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One of the first observations made by newcomers to the annual NCHC conferences and certainly by the participants in its signature program Beginning in Honors (BIH) is that honors enthusiasts of all stripes love to talk about their program or college. The corollary that follows is that thievery of honors practices, programming, and policies is encouraged. The oft-noted welcoming nature of NCHC is tied directly to this communal spirit of sharing. The conference specifically and honors in general operate as an open and free marketplace of ideas for honors practitioners to mold and adapt to their home institutions. While the rules of plagiarism and appropriation of language and ideas operate in honors scholarship and publication, NCHC's

publications enhance the vital exchange of ideas in honors and their centrality to what the organization is and does. Christopher Keller's lead essay for this Forum on the Boundary of Honors, "'Mad and Educated, Primitive and Loyal': Comments on the Occupation of Honors," however, transcends the utilitarian value of honors communication and NCHC publications to examine the enterprise of honors, its occupation(s) and what occupies its practitioners. Keller notes, "I began a pathway back to a couple of NCHC monographs to help me chart a course . . . and to think strategically about . . . honors" in a variety of contexts. This approach underscores the sophistication of NCHC's publications and how readers employ them.

In the interest of full disclosure, I want to acknowledge that I am a long-sitting co-chair of NCHC's Publications Board as well as General Editor of the NCHC Monograph Series and that Chris Keller is a member of said Publications Board. Thus, we share a fiduciary responsibility for the care, nurturing, and development of NCHC's publications. He even cites my claim, which I believe/hope/pray is not a self-serving one, "that the most profound and compelling evidence [that 'honors as an occupation and discipline is professional'] is to be found in NCHC's publications and the scholarship, intellection, and commitment they present to readers" (Portnoy 39). Part of the value of Keller's enterprise is the way he implicates himself and his "juxtaposition" of two NCHC monographs, *Occupy Honors Education* and *The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education: New Research Evidence*, in a meta-discourse to deal with some cosmic, ontological, existential questions about honors education and its societal and political context. In that sense, he follows in the tradition of the scholarly work of Samuel Schuman, especially in *If Honors Students Were People: Holistic Honors Education*, and other authors in previous *JNCHC* Forums who are pushing the boundaries of honors strategies and honors discourse.

The breadth and depth of the meditations on honors education in these two monographs deserve acknowledgment, which Keller certainly provides, but they also need encouragement and celebration, which is perhaps where Keller and I diverge. He is wary, suspicious even, of what he labels the "conjunctive" nature of honors scholarship and where its additive proclivities may lead. Keller writes that "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.'" I feel more sanguine about these connections: I am eager to hear about a new direction or approach or topic in the next monograph proposal or within the newly minted pages of *JNCHC*. The

epigraph to E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* provides the essential ingredient for a good thesis and essay: "Only connect . . ." Like Ada Long, Founding Editor of *Honors in Practice* (HIP) and JNCHC, I have great faith in our peer reviewers, especially the members of the respective Editorial Boards of the journals and the members of the Publications Board, to recognize when a manuscript lacks the requisite connective tissue to honors or to "items," as the JNCHC Editorial Policy states, "on the higher education agenda . . . and presentations of emergent issues relevant to honors education" (vi). Keller's interrogation of these conjunctive elements is critical and astute, but I believe such worries are allayed when reviewers assess submissions and when readers read these works once they are published. (More on readers in a moment.)

Keller also observes a distinction between the boundaries (or lack thereof) in honors discourse and other academic disciplines:

Scholarship in most professional organizations typically does have strict "occupational [boundaries and] barriers" . . . 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.

Where Keller sees a division, I see a continuum. I find nothing surprising or untoward when Richard Badenhausen uses "the lens of Michel Foucault's writing on discipline and training" in his rejection of the "standardization implicitly in certification" (25) or when K. Patrick Fazioli, in contemplating honors professionalization, proposes a "sociological framework for investigating honors inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice" (58). I am enchanted by the notion that the work of Lev S. Vygotsky informs the efforts by the Lloyd International Honors College at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to internationalize the curriculum by incorporating the developmental power of play in learning (Kirkman and Ali). Disciplinary journals similarly push past strict boundaries, as in Kelly Ross's recent *PMLA* essay, "Watching from Below: Racialized Surveillance and Vulnerable Sousveillance." Ross's topic is ostensibly slave narratives, but her essay begins with two examples of recorded police/citizen encounters: someone witnessing police officers beating a man in handcuffs and another citizen videotaping an officer shooting a suspect "to death as [he] ran away" (Ross 299). In the pages of the *Flannery O'Connor Review*, Scott Forschler recontextualizes that most

Catholic of writers in his essay “Shocking Grace, Sudden Enlightenment: O’Connor and the Koans of Zen Buddhism.” The stretching of boundaries, especially in an academic landscape where publishing remains at the heart of professional achievement and success and where expanding perspectives is critical, the difference between honors and other disciplines, if it exists at all, is only one of degree. The paths to insight and understanding seem infinite.

Keller’s three takeaway points and the questions that he raises, particularly in his concluding paragraphs, are perspicacious, complex, and challenging, and other writers in either this Forum or later journal issues will address them. I want to explore the constellation of questions Keller raises about the audience of NCHC’s publications. The subtext conjures an image of NCHC members talking only to themselves about themselves. The Publications Board will certainly admit that one of the primary reasons for starting *JNCHC*, *HIP*, and the NCHC Monograph Series was that the membership needed appropriate platforms to engage in thoughtful and formal discourse about honors. Having accomplished that goal, however, and then pursuing multiple online venues for accessing this material, the Publications Board has reached hundreds of thousands of readers around the world. As I remarked in a previous Forum essay:

Beyond access through the UNL Digital Commons, *JNCHC*, for example, is now included in ten prestigious abstracting and indexing services, including ERIC. Here are data points collected by Emily Walshe, a research librarian at LIU and longstanding member of NCHC’s Publications Board, about the impact of *JNCHC*. Since 2000, *JNCHC* has engaged 492 unique authors from 248 different institutions and agencies. Fifty-four academic disciplines are represented, and nearly one-third of all articles are collaborative. *JNCHC* averages 579 readers for every article. In 2019 alone, library databases logged over 12,000 retrievals of *JNCHC* content; its digital imprint in UNL’s archive exceeds 25,000 downloads. (40)

Given that the institutional membership of NCHC is approximately 800 and that several hundred people hold individual memberships, the readership surely extends well beyond an audience of only honors educators. But Keller wants to know—legitimate questions all—who these readers are and for what purposes they read NCHC publications:

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? . . . 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?

Because of Walshe, we have bibliometric documentation of our national and international readership. We do not know exactly who these individuals are and what impact our material has on them; reader-response criticism confirmed decades ago the futility of thinking that anyone can control readers and their responses. What we can do, however, is extend to them the welcoming warmth of NCHC: To our readers who believe in the efficacy of reading and writing and the enterprise of honors publications, here is an invitation—a clarion call—for you to write for us, to submit a manuscript so that we can learn about you and how you engage with the universe, so dear to us, of honors education and scholarship.

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