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Fall 2021

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Honors Alumni Re-Activation through Interpersonal Engagement: Lessons Learned during COVID

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Abstract: The 2020–2021 academic year presented many challenges to honors educators, including their ability to support honors education as a community of opportunity in virtual learning environments. This study considers how remote learning platforms emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated previously underutilized resources, such as alumni. Authors describe programming that emphasizes opportunities for interpersonal engagement between students and alumni and maximizes potential for relationship building and communal longevity. Intersections for alumni/student virtual connection in classrooms are identified, as are co-curricular events and recruitment initiatives for prospective students. To assess impact, a survey instrument was designed according to a conceptual model of student engagement and satisfaction level and distributed to enrolled honors students. Beyond simply assessing the value students experience in the moment, researchers also evaluate how virtual experiences with alumni motivated students to attend similar events, promote such events to peers, and engage as alumni participants post-graduation. The survey provides an opportunity for students to share free responses; and subsequent content analysis of student response identifies common themes. Results reinforce current literature, suggesting that alumni participation in the curricular and co-curricular life of an honors community illustrates the value of human capital. Alumni provide a motivational force that challenges students to critically reflect on issues such as vocational discernment, networking, embracing undergraduate experiences, and resiliency. Authors conclude with ideas on future collaborations between honors alumni and students.

Keywords: university and college alumni; mentoring in education; social capital; relationship quality; West Chester University of Pennsylvania (PA)–Honors College

Citation: *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 2021, 22(2):27–35

On March 11, 2020, our university president announced the extension of spring break by an additional week to prepare everyone for 100% online education in response to COVID-19. No one could have imagined that we would remain remote through the next full academic year. As we scrambled to discover strategies for providing meaningful educational experiences and maintaining our commitment to François G. Amar's notion of honors as a "community of opportunity," it became apparent that socio-emotional needs of our students needed as much attention as pedagogical considerations. Committed to capitalizing on community as a foundational honors experience, we asked ourselves two questions: 1) How can we create meaningful interpersonal engagement in an online environment? 2) How can we preserve our honors community given a completely virtual college experience?

Amar accurately captured our bleak concerns about the status of our university's financial situation, so prudence caused us to shift attention to resources beyond funding. What we had in abundance was human capital. Specifically, we rediscovered a population of untapped stakeholders: our alumni. We had previously neglected alumni as active contributors to our program largely because of geographic distance, but remote learning opened doors for them. Alumni could now contribute gifts of social/network relationships, intellect, and life experiences, promoting community connections and enriching our curriculum in a time of pandemic upheaval.

Harvard economist Claudia Golden's (2016) work on the power of human capital notes that investing in individuals beyond financial incentives—offering education, networks, skill development, and experience—results in greater productivity for the population being served. Human capital offers non-financial currency in the form of time and shared life experience. Investment of time and shared history from program alumni strengthens the community both vertically and horizontally, adding depth and history to our community and extending it beyond current membership.

West Chester University of Pennsylvania (WCUPA) Honors Program is like many others, as Amar suggests, in attributing much of our programmatic success to the emphasis we place on community building. This focus aligns with our institution's strategic plan, which aims to "enhance meaningful and engaging experiences among and between students, faculty, staff, alumni, and local communities to promote lifelong learning" (WCUPA Strategic Plan, 2021). Normally, we rely upon learning pathways like community engagement, professional development, diversity and inclusion, and sustainability to build a meaningful and engaging community. The COVID pandemic put the goal of community engagement to a monumental test.

We were not alone, of course. The National Conference on State Legislatures reported in spring 2020, more than 1,300 colleges and universities across all fifty states canceled in-person classes or shifted to online-only instruction (Smalley, 2021). According to data gathered by the College Crisis Initiative (2021), in the fall of 2020 44% of institutions developed fully or primarily online instruction, and 21% used a hybrid model. Our institution shifted to remote learning for the entire academic year, choosing academic risks instead of health risks.

However wise this strategy may have been, it dramatically thwarted a sense of community in our institution and resulted in a real sense of loss among students and faculty. Many shared educational theorist Michael W. Ledoux's skepticism, voiced in 2005, about online education's ability to achieve learning outcomes with compromised learning communities. Ledoux cautioned that remote learning "must acknowledge factors beyond the confines of a course to create a learning community" (p. 196). The pandemic presented us with a crisis of both student engagement and satisfaction. Without discarding definitions of student success grounded in academic achievement, perseverance, and creation of new knowledge, we needed to heighten our energy toward inspiring student motivation. Greater intentionality in using alumni provided one solution, particularly by creating opportunities for engagement between students and alumni in the context of honors programming.

Research with honors students at our institution has established that transformational learning occurs when students think critically and subsequently reflect on personal connections, conversations, and other interactions shared with cultural others. In the interpersonal engagement process, students 1) listen to the stories of others; 2) probe for additional insight through questions posed in face-to-face dialogue; 3) devote time to a process of focused reflection following the exchange of information (Dean & Jendzurski, 2012, 2013, & 2020). Interpersonal engagement remains a cornerstone of transformational leadership formation among our students, and, as a result, it remains a strategy well known to our alumni. Our remote learning environment during the pandemic enabled us to combine the power of alumni with the power of targeted interpersonal engagement to maintain and strengthen a learning community within honors.

Existing research, particularly from scholars in education and business, champions the value alumni afford their institutions. Much attention is devoted to financial and philanthropic relationships (Stevick, 2010; Tanis, 2020, Tuma et al., 2020). The implied impact of financial support from generous alumni, as seen in areas such as endowing programs and funding

scholarships, unquestionably strengthens educational institutions, but evidence is scant that financial contributions from alumni directly affect student success.

By contrast, an emerging body of literature suggests that the nonfinancial engagement of alumni does directly correlate with student success by increasing:

1. Career opportunities, mentoring, and networking experiences (Ashline, 2017; Dollinger et al., 2019; Larsson et al., 2021; Skrzypek et al., 2019);
2. Engagement in the campus community both personally and academically (Dollinger et al., 2019);
3. Students' sense of connectedness and integration with university community (Ebert et al., 2015; Gamlath, 2021; Priest & Donley, 2014; Skrzypek et al., 2019), and
4. Students' interpersonal skills, self-esteem, and confidence in overcoming adversity (Gamlath, 2021; Larsson et al., 2021; Long, 2016; Priest & Donley, 2014; Skrzypek et al., 2019).

Other research suggests that undergraduates who perceive benefits from alumni interactions will likely attend similar programs and participate in them as alumni (Dollinger et al., 2019; Ebert et al., 2015). In short, alumni interaction with students creates multiple conditions that enhance student success.

During COVID-19, we created virtual opportunities for alumni interaction with current students in three ways: classroom guest appearances; participation in programs sponsored by our co-curricular honors student association (HSA); and taking part in our intensive recruitment process for incoming students in fall 2021. In a sophomore-level course, a multicultural alumni panel presented perspectives on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and on another occasion a panel of past HSA leaders provided their insights on leadership development. Through a junior/senior capstone course, alumni speakers shared their CVs, offered advice for making application to graduate/professional school, recommended undergraduate experiences they found particularly valuable to their vocational success, and fielded student questions. At the HSA, alumni met in breakout rooms with students in appropriate disciplinary areas to offer course scheduling advice and participated in panels on "what I learned from my honors experiences that followed me into life beyond graduation." Finally, alumni served as team leaders in a component

of our recruitment process in which a team of one alumnus and two current students interviewed each candidate.

Using Qualtrics, we adapted a customer satisfaction (CSAT) survey based on a five-point Likert Scale to evaluate students' satisfaction levels regarding their interaction with alumni. Our results suggested high positive awareness of networking abilities, affirmation of their vocational path and affiliation with honors, insight into leadership skills, and the utility of the honors curriculum. In all instances alumni voiced pleasure in their involvement and extended offers to assist with future engagement opportunities.

As we transition into a "new normal" in 2021–2022, we look forward to revising our former patterns of alumni-student interaction in order to retain the advantages of virtual interactions with alumni. The unanticipated success of virtually involving alumni in the life of the current honors community motivates us to consider more outlets for collaboration. While countless opportunities present themselves, we identify four areas of alumni interaction that will enhance honors education: 1) student capstone projects; 2) direct student-alumni connection around professional interests; 3) collaborative alumni/student research opportunities; and 4) facilitating networking opportunities through an alumni database that can support alumni, current students, and the broader university.

CAPSTONE PROJECT MENTORSHIP

The culmination of our curriculum involves a senior-level capstone project. Based on the insights from previous studies on the value alumni mentorship provides undergraduates (Tyran & Garcia, 2015), we are exploring ways we might virtually link students to alumni who share project interests.

CONNECTION AROUND PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS

Because we emphasize interdisciplinary work, the ability to match students with alumni from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds could foster innovative outcomes. One particularly intriguing suggestion comes from Chi, Jones, and Grandham (2012), who advocate alumni-student connections using the Smart Alumni System (SAS), which promotes access through mobile technologies such as cell phones via app development. Collaborating with colleagues in computer science could lead to the creation and dissemination of a program-specific app as well, increasing students' access to alumni and vice versa.

COLLABORATIVE SCHOLARSHIP

Promoting collaborative scholarship between professors and students, or between a student and an alumnus in a relevant field of study, promotes student learning, research, and vocational discernment. Leadership development scholars Sue Marquis Gordon and Jennifer Lynne Edwards (2012) note that opportunities for students engaging in research exist on most campuses but are often limited by a lack of student research experience, which disadvantages them as candidates for graduate study. They recommend creating virtual research teams involved in action research, characterized as a “participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes grounded in a participatory worldview” (p. 208). Likewise, Heller et al. (2015) found that collaborative research opportunities constituted one of the top motivations for alumni participation with current students. Creating such opportunity online increases the possibilities for such collaboration.

NETWORKING AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Finally, institutions should prioritize maintaining an active honors alumni database, facilitate channels of communication between alumni and the honors college, and explore the formation of a robust honors alumni association. One curricular experience with proven impact on long-term institutional support among alumni is international travel. Veteran honors educator Mary Kay Mulvaney (2017), interviewing her alumni, showed that honors study abroad experiences provide “positive long-term impact in the area of institutional loyalty” (p. 59). Such findings help justify the costs of high impact practices. Similarly, a study of seventy-eight alumni who participated in our international research and service partnership between 2003–2011 with South Africa (Dean & Jendzurski, 2013) found that this participation generated greater institutional support for that program.

An ongoing task for honors directors is to justify the value of honors education and the inherent need for resources. We affirm Amar’s concerns that “some of those shifted dollars [during COVID] are not coming back” and “many challenges of the post-pandemic era will be tied to a scarcity of resources.” Aligning honors education with recognized practices of student success and with institutional mission will prove more critical than ever in our post-pandemic reality, but limiting our discussion of honors resources to

financial capital alone is a mistake; the human capital of our alumni provides a plentiful resource we should embrace.

The nearly universal experiences of remote learning in 2020–2021 challenged professionals in higher education to examine the pedagogical practices historically used to champion student achievement. From forced reflection this past year, we discovered the human capital our alumni can contribute to student success. Remote learning enabled us to cross geographic divides and create meaningful spaces for our alumni to engage with current students, making alumni a visible part of our community. During the pandemic, we discovered that interpersonal engagement with alumni enhances students' appreciation in networking, leadership, interdisciplinary learning, and membership in the honors community.

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