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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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Absent any factual evidence or hard data, a whimsical flight of fancy might conjure up a stereotypical honors director of the 1950s—before the launch of the National Collegiate Honors Council in the mid-1960s—as a rather somber fellow: an academic dedicated to rigorous curricula and high intellectual standards; a devoted adherent to well-established and widely accepted traditions of scholarship; a demanding teacher dedicated to identifying and training future scholars; an educational practitioner rooted in past customs and resistant to change; and an old-line intellectual focused on the life of the mind.

While few honors educators have personally known such a fellow, the stereotype may linger among those who have not kept up with honors education in the past fifty years or so. One demonstration of its distance from the current reality is the widespread eagerness among honors administrators to embrace the challenges of the COVID epidemic as an opportunity for change. This optimism became apparent in the special section on “Honors and COVID-19” in the 2021 issue of *Honors in Practice (HIP)*, in which the nine “essays on the pandemic’s effects on honors mostly make the best of a fraught and frustrating year for honors administrators, faculty, and students, identifying ways that the disruptions in normal routines have led to innovations and improvements” (“Editor’s Introduction,” ix).

Like the essays in *HIP* that explored what effects the pandemic had already had on honors, the essays on “Honors after COVID” in the Forum in this issue of *JNCHC* forecast a brighter future for honors despite the hazards that lie ahead. They build on embracing the full lives of honors students, not just their minds, the trend that has increasingly characterized honors education in recent decades and that Samuel Schuman described eloquently in his 2013 NCHC monograph, *If Honors Students Were People: Holistic Honors Education*. They welcome new pedagogies, admissions criteria, honors curricula, academic standards, definitions of scholarship, social activities, and cultural norms. They accept risk-taking and the unknown. These writers are not your real or fictional honors educators of yore.

The contributors to the Forum and also the authors of major research essays responded to the following Call for Papers, which was distributed to all

members of the National Collegiate Honors Council in the NCHC newsletter and in the previous issue of *JNCHC*:

The next issue of *JNCHC* (**deadline: September 1, 2021**) invites research essays on any topic of interest to the honors community.

The issue will also include a Forum focused on the theme “Honors after COVID,” in which we invite honors educators to look beyond the urgencies of the moment and imagine the pandemic’s impact on the future of honors in higher education. We invite essays of roughly 1000–2000 words that consider this theme in a practical and/or theoretical context.

The lead essay for the Forum (available at <https://www.nchchonors.org/uploaded/NCHC_FILES/Pubs/Pandemic_Peril.pdf?utm_source=Direct&utm_medium=Informz&utm_campaign=Bulk%20Email>) is by François G. Amar of the University of Maine. In his essay, “Honors in the Post-Pandemic World: Situation Perilous,” Amar provides a wide-ranging yet succinct description of the changes wrought by COVID and speculation about how these changes, though perilous, can lead to significant future benefits. He stresses the moral and educational imperative of making our way through the current crisis by adhering to “the core values of honors, such as diversity, community, student agency, and inclusive excellence,” which will help honors weather the coming financial contractions. At the same time, the pandemic has taught us lessons and offered future pathways that can advance the value of honors through benefits, like interinstitutional collaboration, that have become a necessity during the crisis. The synchronicity between the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement has also highlighted inequities that require renewed attention and new action that can transform honors, infusing it with deeper introspection of past and current inadequacies in addressing issues of racial and social justice.

Contributors to the Forum on “Honors after COVID” may, but are not obliged to, respond directly to Amar’s essay. Questions that Forum contributors might consider include:

- Will the technologies that have been thrust upon all educators and students be a threat to future learning or a doorway into enriched educational options?

- Will the “core values of honors, such as diversity, community, student agency, and inclusive excellence” gain strength from the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement?
- Will these “core values” elicit skepticism among those who see honors as elitist?
- Will the access made possible through Zoom and other internet connections make honors more feasible and attractive to previously skeptical or excluded students?
- Will the financial gains of relying increasingly on distance learning disrupt the sense of community that honors fosters?
- Will privileges for honors students—such as small class sizes, close relationships to instructors, and opportunities for research, study abroad, and service learning—come under fire as unaffordable luxuries?
- What specific forms of intra- and inter-institutional cooperation might benefit honors both nationally and in individual programs and colleges?
- Are national test scores likely now to become less influential in admissions to institutions and to honors, and to what effect?

Five Forum responses and three research essays were accepted for publication.

All the responses to François G. Amar’s essay, which leads off the Forum, affirm individual or general points he made to initiate the conversation, especially his point that the pandemic is likely to strengthen in several ways the “core values of honors, such as diversity, community, student agency, and inclusive excellence.” Kristine A. Miller leads off with “Business as Unusual: Honors and Post-Pandemic Gen Z,” in which she writes, “Honors is unusual not because it is elitist or exclusionary but because it responds directly, thoughtfully, and creatively to the needs and concerns of each new cohort of students.” During the pandemic, honors educators have doubled down on this creative response to changing cultures and conditions, offering a model that can “help our institutions to question a return to business as usual and to prepare all students for what looks like an increasingly uncertain future.” Miller offers examples from the scholarship on honors, the values defined by the NCHC, and the innovations at her home institution, Utah State University, to explain how honors can lead the way in a changing educational environment.

In the same spirit as Miller, Betsy Greenleaf Yarrison argues that the disruptions and innovations caused by the pandemic at the University of Baltimore—especially in the transmutations to online learning—have offered honors educators a chance to foster inclusion and diversity in a far more authentic way than they had before. In “Honors the Hard Way,” Yarrison makes the point that defining community as connectedness, be it through online communication or other technological mechanisms, should displace the notion that community can exist only in a defined physical space—“a brick-and-mortar education”—especially in preparation for a virtual workplace. Students who for economic, geographical, or personal reasons cannot put themselves in one particular space at prescribed times can now arrange to be part of an online community, thus gaining access that would otherwise be unavailable to them. Yarrison concludes: “This pandemic moment might be a tipping point for examining whether a little reimagining with new technologies might help us come closer to attaining greater diversity and better inclusion.”

In “Honors Alumni Re-Activation through Interpersonal Engagement: Lessons Learned during COVID,” Kevin W. Dean and Michael B. Jendzurski of West Chester University pinpoint one particular benefit to their honors program that resulted from the pandemic: the inclusion of alumni within the honors community. They write, “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.” To assess the value of this expansion of the honors community to include alumni, the authors used Qualtrics to design a participant satisfaction survey, and the results indicated a high degree of satisfaction among both current students and alums. They identified four ways to make best use of alumni: “Capstone project mentorship”; “Connection around professional interests”; “Collaborative scholarship”; and “Networking and institutional support”—all benefits arising from the exigencies of the pandemic.

Another description of a specific benefit of the pandemic in inspiring honors innovation is the focus of “‘Building Together’: City as Text™, Intersectionality, and Urban Farming during COVID-19.” Carla Janell Pattin of the University of Toledo Main Campus describes how the concurrence of the public health emergency with the social justice urgency of Black Lives Matter opened up new possibilities and practices in her course *Multicultural Toledo*,

which “teaches students about the intersection and interaction among ableism, sexism, elitism, homophobia, and racism in land access.” Constrained by remote learning, restrictions on travel, and social distancing, Pattin’s course took on a new character and exigency: “Given the growing food insecurities resulting from the economic impact of COVID-19, the students developed a shared sense of responsibility to improve land and food justice in a local Black community.” As a Black feminist, practitioner of intersectionality, and facilitator of *City as Text*[™], Pattin took advantage of the pandemic to create a focus on urban farms in her class that, among other benefits, “unearthed recruitment opportunities to attract rising scholars left out of the honors experience.”

In the final Forum essay—“From ‘Filled’ to ‘Fulfilled’: Tech-Minimal Experiences Bolster Core Honors Values”—Adam Blincoe and Sarai Blincoe of Longwood University depart from the previous essays in seeing the benefits of COVID not in expanding the use of remote learning and online technologies but in the opposite. While acknowledging the value of technology during and after the pandemic—“Videoconferencing saved our last two semesters from oblivion, and tech solutions will help us adapt to certain post-pandemic challenges”—the authors argue that tech already has an “oversized role” in students’ lives, and low-tech solutions are a better way to address budgetary shortages wrought by COVID. The authors recommend instead the “Classroom as a Tech-Free Oasis” enriched by “Communal Reading and Contemplative Walks” and by “Shabbats and Fasts.” In sum, they balance the appreciation for technological innovations wrought by COVID with a counterargument that “tech-minimal experiences are inexpensive ways to enrich students’ lives and make what is best about honors education flourish.”

* * *

The first of the three research essays in this issue of *JNCHC* continues the consideration of COVID’s impact on honors education. “Building Community Online in Honors Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” an essay describing impacts of the pandemic in the Netherlands, is by Annegien Langeloo, Wietske de Vries, Birte Klusmann, and Marca Wolfensberger of the Hanze University of Applied Sciences in Groningen. The authors describe the quantitative results of a questionnaire that they developed and administered to thirty-seven teachers in June of 2021; the purpose of the survey was to assess “both the quality and importance of contact with students and colleagues as experienced by teachers as well as changes therein due to the pandemic.” They specifically address “teachers’ well-being, community

building in online and face-to-face education, and the subjective impact [teachers] experienced on their teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic.” Their study was both quantitative, presenting in table form the “Means, Medians, Standard Deviations, and Spearman’s rho Correlation Matrix for Quality and Importance of Contact with Students and Colleagues,” and qualitative, eliciting answers to open-ended questions about teachers’ experiences. Results showed that teachers started to value contact with both students and colleagues more during the pandemic but that their opportunities to interact with students were more frequent and satisfying than with colleagues. What teachers missed the most was face-to-face interaction with their colleagues, a problem that needs to be addressed as the post-pandemic evolves.

In line with the increased emphasis on holistic approaches to honors education as advocated by Samuel Schuman and others, the next research essay—“Human-Centered Design as a Basis for a Transformative Curriculum”—describes and evaluates an interdisciplinary curriculum adopted at East Carolina University starting in 2017. The essay is co-authored by Bhibha M. Das, Tim Christensen, Elizabeth Hodge, Teal Darkenwald, W. Wayne Godwin, and Gerald Weckesser, who have been involved in the implementation of the curriculum and qualitative measurement of its success. The authors describe the basic principles of Human-Centered Design (HCD) and the ways it has informed the first-year, two-semester-sequence honors colloquium. The students first undertake a study of design concepts in relation to their career paths; next, they form teams to understand complex problems such as sexual assault on campus or environmental sustainability; and then they “work toward prototyping possible solutions that might impact their identified ‘wicked’ problems,” sometimes extending their study into another year for their Signature Honors Project. A study of 98 reflective essays that the students wrote about their experiences in the course was the basis for identifying key themes related to the course and for determining that HCD had achieved the goals of a “transformative learning experience” for students: “shifting their worldview through critical reflection”; autonomous decision-making and understanding “their own potential for growth and change”; and questioning “the basis of prevailing ideologies” with the possible consequence of finding “a calling to address societal problems.” The authors conclude that honors colleges can use their strategies “post-pandemically to engage students and manage potential pitfalls and pivots in the curriculum and program through HCD.”

This issue of *JNCHC* concludes with “Reading as Bearing Witness: Incorporating the Voices of Incarcerated Youth in Honors” by Lauren Collins, Amelia Hawes, Jorgia Hawthorne, Nicole Gomez, and Erin Saldin. The essay is a case study of a collaboration between the University of Montana’s Davidson Honors College and the nonprofit Free Verse Writing Project, which provides an outlet for the writing of incarcerated youth. Collins and Saldin were coordinators for the course; Hawes and Hawthorne were students; and Nicole Gomez is Executive Director of the Free Verse Writing Project. The authors are thus able to describe the 2020–2021 benefits of the course, titled “Ways of Knowing,” to the faculty and students as well as to the nonprofit agency. The readings for the course included multiple publications written by incarcerated student youths and published through or by the Free Verse Writing Project. The student writers came from four detention facilities in Montana, and they reflected on “the themes of isolation, anxiety, fear, family, home, exploration, whimsy, and discovery contemplated while experiencing incarceration during a pandemic.” Publication of their writing gave them “a platform where they can express themselves freely without being limited by the criminal label that has come to define them in the public eye.” For the honors students, “reading personal stories from incarcerated youth put into perspective what a difficult and isolating experience detention can be” and led them to “consider the roles they played in systems of oppression.” The course was an opportunity for “honors students to read as a form of bearing witness to the lives and struggles of marginalized voices,” which is a potent way to fulfill one of the core values of honors education both now and in the future.

