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The Lexicon of Honors Education

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LIU Brooklyn, 1979–1983

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Abstract: As part of the *National Collegiate Honors Council's* (2022) collection of essays about the value of honors to its graduates (1967–2019), the author reflects on the personal and professional impacts of the honors experience.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; first-generation college students; Long Island University, Brooklyn (NY)—Honors College

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The word of the year, as my LIU Brooklyn Honors Program peers and I would identify it in 1979, was “juxtaposition,” not a word I was very familiar with before entering college but one that was tossed about with abandon by professors in my first-year seminars (including Bernice Braid, director and co-founder of the LIU Brooklyn Honors Program) and that would become a close friend by my spring essay on *Madame Bovary*. Seeing things in relation to each other would prove to be an important feature in my education. As a first-generation college student, I had little forewarning about what college would hold in store. My selection of an undergraduate institution was pragmatic, chosen primarily because of a generous scholarship and proximity to home, where I continued to live during my undergraduate years. Uninspired reasons perhaps, but the outcome proved fortuitous. Those team-taught seminars in literature, history, and philosophy, capped at 16 to encourage robust participation, were the single most important part of my undergraduate education. The courses, which met consecutively thrice weekly, shared a theme and kept pace with each other, marching through historical periods, allowing us to see the connections among the disciplines and demonstrating how ideas

manifested in events and artistic creation. Once a month or so, three cohorts of students met together along with six professors to discuss the places where these disciplines overlapped, but to be honest the imbrications were ever-present, encouraging the students to see how ideology erupts in art and vice versa.

When I returned to work at that same Honors Program in 1988, after a brief foray into public relations, the word of the year was “experiential” in anticipation of the third United Nations semester hosted by LIU Brooklyn. City as Text™, the world as laboratory, encourages an exploration of place as a work of art, requiring students to distinguish between what they expect to see and what is really there and facilitating their understanding of the effects of their own presence on the landscape. The opportunity to teach a few interdisciplinary electives eventually sent me in the direction of a graduate program where I would study the relationship between the visual arts and literature, looking at photographs, both imagined and actual, in American novels since *The House of the Seven Gables*. I was by then primed to investigate the ways that art shapes and is shaped by culture and clear in the knowledge that literature cannot be studied in a vacuum.

By 1998, in a culmination of all my experiences in honors programs—as student, assistant director, and teacher—the word was most definitely “interdisciplinary,” as I began a tenure-track position at Wilkes Honors College, a campus 40 miles from its founding institution, Florida Atlantic University. Instead of touring classrooms and visiting the library during my interview, I watched bulldozers overturn soil on a large plot of land in a yet-to-be-developed community. The buildings were over a year from completion, and students would not cross the threshold for another 18 months, but five faculty would create the curriculum whose distinction would be interdisciplinary education. We interviewed students whose imaginations were up to the task of the campus’s blank slate. Like the founding faculty, they were thrilled by endless possibilities, the absence of traditions and customs that might interfere with new ideas. My colleagues and I created a curriculum that relied strongly on team-taught classes and linked courses designed to talk to each other through chronologically linked readings and common meetings. It didn’t replicate my first-year seminars (though not for lack of trying on my part), but it did capture the spirit of curiosity, investigation, and collaboration that I experienced in my undergraduate career. The absence of departments in that institution created an environment conducive to intellectual engagement. The corridor that housed my office was home to faculty in

anthropology, biology, history, philosophy, political science, psychology, and physics, and our team-taught classes were often the result of hallway conversations and early evening debates.

So many of the principles and techniques of honors education have permeated higher education as best practices—flipped classrooms, first-year seminars, team-teaching, learning communities, all espousing the belief that cohorts exposed to a spectrum of perspectives are better able to see and respond to the world. Honors education requires an understanding of context, placement, perspective, and interconnections, all of which contribute to the ability to read a text or a room.

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