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Spring 2018

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Badenhausen, Richard, "Making Honors Success Scripts Available to Students from Diverse Backgrounds" (2018). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 574.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/574>

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Making Honors Success Scripts Available to Students from Diverse Backgrounds

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In her lead forum essay, Naomi Yavneh Klos thoughtfully encourages us to reexamine our admissions practices in honors. She argues,

We need a more nuanced reevaluation of standards that recognizes the role of systemic bias in traditional metrics of academic excellence and that holistically evaluates each student's strengths and challenges in the context of individual and cultural experience. Such practices strengthen honors by identifying a diverse spectrum of students who both benefit from and enrich our honors community. (8)

I would like to take that call for reevaluation one step further by asking members of the honors community to interrogate the way we narratively frame honors experiences so that these constructs are as inclusive as possible. Employing admissions practices that do not disadvantage students from underrepresented backgrounds is crucial, but also essential is that we do not unintentionally turn away such students even before they might consider

applying to honors. The way we discuss honors and the stories we tell about it can signal to underrepresented students that they do not belong. One way to think about this issue is to pose a question, with apologies to Raymond Carver: What do we talk about when we talk about honors? Ultimately, I want to think about how success narratives are structured in honors education; ask how open or available these narratives are to students from underrepresented backgrounds; and make sure we are not simply reinforcing privilege when our narratives make promises to students about what it means to join the honors community.

Sara Ahmed's thrilling book, *The Promise of Happiness*, provides a useful framework for this discussion. Writing from the perspective of a queer, feminist woman of color, Ahmed interrogates the way that particular groups are "alienated" from what she calls "happiness scripts . . . a set of instructions for what women and men must do to be happy" (59). A typical normative happiness script, for example, might involve a marriage between a man and a woman and the children that follow. Ahmed argues that we become "orientated" by particular "objects" that establish an expectation for happiness because of the positive affective value attached to the objects, as when a bride might imagine her wedding as "the happiest day" of her life, one of many examples Ahmed cites (34, 41). She observes that while this configuration creates a set of promises around happiness, certain marginalized groups are structurally isolated from those promises, groups like "feminist killjoys," "melancholic migrants," and "unhappy queers," the titles of the three chapters that follow the introduction to *The Promise of Happiness*.

In slightly tweaking Ahmed's frame, I am suggesting that in higher education we have constructed a set of what I'll call "success scripts," scripts or narratives that propose what success looks like for students; that (over)determine who has access to success; and that are reinforced structurally by our institutional practices, from our admissions procedures to pedagogical methods to allocation of financial support. The honors community is not immune to this tendency. The key issue I am raising is how honors students from underrepresented groups are positioned against and within these success scripts and whether we are unwittingly alienating such students from these scripts, whether we are doing everything in our power to ensure that success narratives are as available to disadvantaged students as they are to students from more privileged backgrounds.

Consider one obvious example of how this signaling around success operates. A high school student investigating honors programs is liable to visit

a program website and see within the first few minutes a minimum score for applying to the program. (The mean minimum ACT requirement among surveyed NCHC member schools in the 2015 membership survey was 26.12.) We know that standardized test scores correlate most positively with family income, and most honors programs that have explored the relationship between ACT and success in their programs have found little correlation, yet our community continues to over-depend on such scores, thus overdetermining what entering cohorts look like. Think about the success narrative that is being communicated by using the ACT as a gatekeeper and the manner in which it excludes. The University of Wisconsin's honors program found this situation so troubling a number of years ago that it abolished standardized test scores as a criterion for application, and the next year their first-year retention rate went up. While such moves take courage and may conflict with university administrators' concern with rankings and metrics, think of the way that deemphasizing scores changes the narrative around what constitutes success in high school and how much it expands our welcome to various populations.

Sticking to admissions practices, think how essay questions that ask high school students about volunteer service implicitly favor students from privileged backgrounds who have the luxury to help others for free (or even pay for that privilege) instead of, say, supporting a family by working for a wage. Such questions implicitly announce to the latter group of students that their "service" is somehow of lesser value, less welcome, or less appropriate for an honors applicant. A program that identifies such biases and wishes to expand success scripts might consider employing more open-ended essays that turn on thought experiments or that allow applicants to draw on their lived experience in, for example, an essay recounting a powerful conversation. The two-year college community has thought more carefully about these questions because of the diversity of populations it works with; we in the four-year community could learn much from their experience.

The term "honors" by itself carries an enormous amount of baggage around questions of privilege, elitism, and separateness. We don't help our cause when we reinforce the weight of such baggage by calling for special treatment like priority enrollment or segregate our student populations in posh honors-dedicated residence halls, practices I have criticized elsewhere (Badenhausen).

A further issue is the terminology we use about honors, including how and why we name programs and offices associated with our work. Fellowship advising offices, for example, are often housed in honors colleges: 45%

of NCHC-surveyed honors colleges had such offices in their unit, including the office at my own institution. Many have impressive names like Office of Distinguished Awards or National Competitive Scholarships Program, yet this impressiveness can bleed into intimidation. While such terminology intimates prestige and accomplishment, it also makes it harder for students from underrepresented groups to walk through those doors and situate themselves within that success narrative. For that reason, among others, at Westminster we use the more neutral “Office of Fellowship Advising” for the new office in our honors college. To remind those working in this space that we take the mission of inclusive excellence seriously, we have drafted a strategic plan that calls for the number of fellowship applicants by students from underrepresented groups to exceed the percentage of those students on campus; this is an aspirational outcome but one that will continue to guide us in terms of our practices.

Where success scripts get reinforced most powerfully is in our classrooms, and so we especially need to interrogate our pedagogies to ensure that we are using inclusive approaches to teaching and learning. Libby Roderick explores this topic in her essay “Culturally Responsive Teaching” and warns us not to “perpetuate [society’s] unequal power relations between and among various groups . . . within our own classrooms” (117). Such an approach calls on teachers to be especially responsive, nimble, and flexible, qualities that are particularly suitable for the student-centered focus of most honors classrooms even though that connection between honors pedagogy and inclusivity is not often made explicitly. What I am arguing is that the honors classroom is especially hospitable to inclusive and equitable teaching practices like allowing learners to demonstrate their mastery of material in numerous ways, varying one’s teaching strategies, and helping students connect issues from the classroom to their own lives, three culturally responsive strategies highlighted by Roderick. Asking such questions about our practices can reveal some surprising findings, such as the fact that the default mode of instruction in most writing centers—“nondirective instruction, in which tutors prompt students to come up with the right answers themselves; and a resistance to focusing on grammatical errors”—tends to best serve the needs of privileged students but to “poorly serve . . . female students, minority students, those with low academic standing, and those who grew up speaking a language other than English at home” (Jacobs). Steering students from underrepresented groups to resources that may covertly thwart or frustrate their learning is hardly a habit we want to continue.

I offer one final wrinkle to my challenge. Not only do students from underrepresented groups often feel alienated from success scripts but competing scripts complicate their journeys through our institutions. These include narratives that see college as an abandonment of family; scripts that restrict students' choices of majors to pre-professional disciplines that seemingly promise the assurance of a job; or scripts that implicitly position underrepresented students as "guests in someone else's house," to quote the title of one essay on the unwelcoming climate in universities for students of color (Turner). Such students are bound to feel like guests or even intruders given the work we still have to do in the honors community in addressing the fact that nationally "students enrolled in honors are more likely to come from backgrounds that are more privileged" (Dziesinski, Camarena, and Homrich-Knieling 83), a feature Yavneh Klos notes of her own program. Indeed, I have conducted program reviews at institutions where roughly a third of students are people of color while over 90% of the honors population is white; such a situation is simply unacceptable.

I conclude by returning to Sara Ahmed, who notes how often those alienated from conventional happiness scripts find shame in "hiding" underneath these scripts (101); in other words, they are suppressing their authentic identities as a way of finding a place for themselves in these normative narratives. I am certain some of our students are feeling a similar sort of discomfort because we have yet to expand what success looks like on our campuses, a realization that pains me although it is a pain that pales in comparison to the struggle so many of our students experience when trying to negotiate these narratives. In response to that struggle, I am asking us to rise to the challenge of Lisa Coleman's call to action in her recent introduction to *Occupy Honors Education*, where she claims we are being "naïve if we believe that honors does not have to change integrally, significantly, if we are to be productive players on the world stage as well as on the campuses of our home institutions" (xiv). Putting aside global concerns for a moment, I ask you to evaluate what messages you are sending locally to students who deserve a clear, accessible, and recognizable pathway to success in the language we use to discuss academic achievement in honors.

NOTE

An early draft of this essay was presented at the 2018 meeting of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).

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