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Thinking Critically, Acting Justly

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In October 2011, just two months after I became Director of the University Honors Program at Loyola New Orleans, my new home town was simultaneously proclaimed both “America’s Best City for Foodies” (Forbes) and the country’s “Worst Food Desert” (Lammers). The city known for beignets and crawfish, Mardi Gras and jazz, was revealed to have only one supermarket for each 16,000 residents (half the national average), with some residents traveling over fifteen miles from their homes to purchase fresh produce.

In the past six years, the situation has been somewhat ameliorated by multiple farmers markets throughout the city that accept food stamps and by an urban farm movement that has been repurposing land, abandoned and overgrown since Katrina, in the Lower 9th Ward and St. Bernard Parish. Even so, one of six children in New Orleans experiences food insecurity, and food injustice is not the only challenge facing this city of tremendous inequities:

- 40% of adults are illiterate;
- 39% of New Orleans’ children live in poverty; and

- 1 in 14 black males is incarcerated in a city where 60.2% of the population is African American. (Louisiana has the highest incarceration rate in the world.)

I emphasize my city's inequities because Loyola, a Jesuit university located in uptown New Orleans, intertwines with its community as both a place of privilege and a point of access. Loyola, a masters-level institution, is far more diverse than Tulane, the much larger, less "artsy," and more affluent research university next door. In 2017, Loyola was ranked #4 in the region for ethnic diversity by the *U.S. News & World Report* and, according to *The Princeton Review*, #13 in the country for race/class interaction (Loyola). Although the Loyola University Honors Program is, like many other honors programs and colleges, somewhat "whiter" than the rest of the institution (half of whose undergraduates are students of color), approximately 30% of honors students are people of color, 30% are the first in their families to attend college, and 26% are Pell-eligible. Geographically, 60% of honors students come from outside of Louisiana; some may come for our nationally ranked music industries program, knowing nothing about the city's social justice challenges, while others may decide to come after a "Voluntourism" service or mission trip here in high school. At least 25% of honors students, however, are from the greater New Orleans area and so have experienced in some way the loss and displacement of Katrina regardless of their childhood social and economic backgrounds. More recently, a number of our students lost their homes (some for the second time) or were otherwise affected by the flooding near Baton Rouge in the summer of 2016. Now, as I write this essay, images of devastation from Houston, along with our own city's torrential rain and dysfunctional pumps, are bringing up painful memories and raising anxiety.

I suspect that my colleagues on the provost council at Loyola have turned our conversations into a virtual drinking game, betting on how quickly I will say the word "honors." NCHC board members, in turn, may secretly promise themselves a shot each time I bring up Loyola or New Orleans. I do think my program is special, as each of us does, or at least should, but I am starting my discussion with Loyola because our story crystallizes two essential questions about honors education and social justice: first, how to engage our highest-ability and most motivated students in questions of justice; and second, how honors can be a place of access, equity, and excellence in higher education.

With respect to teaching justice, the startling dichotomy between the outside perception of New Orleans and its challenging realities, along with the diverse backgrounds of our students, was my inspiration in developing

the social justice pedagogy that is now the heart of the Loyola University Honors Program’s core curriculum. The precepts underlying this curriculum—although articulated in the context of a Jesuit honors program—are not specific to faith-based or private education, but I believe they can and should be central to public education as well, preparing students to serve the common good, whatever their career paths or vocation. These precepts include the following:

- Education, particularly for high-ability students, should be grounded in an approach to knowledge that values education for its own sake and also calls students to bring their talents into the service of the world’s great needs, i.e., to relate intellectual concerns to the goals of service, wisdom, and compassion.
- Justice education must be scaffolded into the curriculum as a whole. We cannot expect students to acquire the requisite skills to understand and grapple with questions of justice through a one-off service requirement any more than we can expect first-semester students to write a thesis. Just as we break undergraduate research into a framework of skills—how to read texts, how to find and analyze sources, how to develop an original hypothesis that draws from and responds to received opinion—so we need to provide incremental and ongoing training in the historical understanding of justice, in the embrace of diverse cultures and traditions, and in the experience of others. The Loyola program has articulated and works hard to assess specific “Ignatian values” learning outcomes relating to these issues.
- Experiential education is vital. To understand a community, students need to be part of it, not just talk about it in the classroom. They need to go out into the larger community not just to serve or give back but to comprehend their similarity and solidarity with others whose lives on the surface may seem disparate from their own. And such experiences, incrementally, should go beyond encounters to community-engaged research.

Institutional research has shown that only about 4% of incoming students list “Jesuit mission” as a top reason for choosing Loyola, but that mission—which to the dismay of some of our board members has virtually nothing to do with teaching Catholicism—is to “educate students to be men and women for and with others.” The Honors Consortium of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) has articulated “Essential Characteristics of

a Jesuit Honors Program” <<http://academicaffairs.loyno.edu/honors/essential-characteristics-jesuit-honors-program>> that include a charge to embrace diversity; foster reflection and discernment; promote social justice and preferential care for the poor and the vulnerable; and bring “intellectual talents into service of the world’s great needs.”

These values, to my mind, should be universal. I am not a Catholic and, until I came to Loyola, had only taught at public institutions. My educational background, my experiences in honors at Loyola and previously at the University of South Florida, and my own faith all contribute to my belief that, yes, honors education should prepare students for graduate and professional schools as well as for distinguished careers in both the public and private sectors, but students must also learn how to use their gifts to develop an understanding of the world in its complexities. Specifically, honors graduates need the critical thinking skills to find solutions to twenty-first-century challenges, globally or locally; the ability to listen to and engage with divergent opinions in order to effect a workable compromise; and a moral compass that reminds them to consider the ethical implications of their actions.

In addition to promoting these values in the classroom, we need to address how honors education can promote justice institutionally. As many of us know, in discussions of access, affordability, and equity in higher education, honors is often left out of the conversation because of a false dichotomy between “high ability” and “high need” that is based on an assumption that all highly engaged and creative students come from affluent backgrounds and will excel regardless of the resources afforded them by their institutions. In fact, the high-impact practices included in the NCHC’s “Basic Characteristics” of honors education are of particular benefit to students from underrepresented backgrounds and low socioeconomic status, including first-generation, ethnic minority, undocumented students, and at my institution, “first in family” honors students have the same high four-year graduation rate as those whose parents graduated from college. I suspect that other honors programs have similar outcomes and would appreciate research on this topic.

The power of honors to promote inclusive excellence, however, is not widely recognized, let alone celebrated. At a recent AJCU conference on “the commitment to justice in higher education,” I heard multiple calls for “a new definition of prestige” even as eyes glazed over when I uttered the word “honors.” The important and ongoing conversations about systemic racism included a subtle but palpable bias: a presumed disconnect between the challenges facing marginalized populations in higher education and the

importance of a vaguely defined concept of excellence. Part of that disconnect is the misunderstanding about who actually participates in honors education. The NCHC's 872 member-institutions are public and private, two- and four-year, faith-based and secular. Honors students come from all academic disciplines, represent every U.S. state and many other nations, and are both citizens and undocumented residents. Many are the first in their families to attend college. Many are veterans. They represent the full spectrum of racial and ethnic diversity afforded by our country and may be gay, straight, or transgender.

Public conversations about affirmative action and access for minority students, however, most frequently focus on the 0.04% of American college students who attend Ivy League and other elite institutions, rarely including the 49% attending two-year colleges. The *New York Times* and *Chronicle of Higher Education* rarely, if ever, publish articles about honors at two-year institutions or highlight honors colleges and programs, collectively, as one of this nation's best-kept secrets in addressing issues of access, affordability, and excellence.

As an honors community, we need to do a better job telling our story, but we also need to do a better job in our essential task of thinking critically and acting justly regarding who participates in honors. For example, most of us recognize the cultural biases in the standardized tests, which are still an important component of our country's educational landscape, but even when we assess success in honors programs with more qualitative data, we often extoll our students' standardized test scores and GPAs to board members or upper-level administrators. Many large honors colleges—and some smaller colleges and programs as well—still rely predominantly or exclusively on a matrix of test scores and GPAs. Even at some avowedly “test optional” schools, the SAT or ACT is no longer optional if the student wishes to be considered for the institution's honors program.

The GPA, combined with class rank, can balance some of the shortcomings of the ACT; the valedictorian at even the most poorly resourced high schools is generally bright, engaged, and highly motivated. The GPA alone is also not the answer, though; a student's grades might have slipped in a given semester because his family lost their home or a parent was struggling with addiction. A holistic review process examines and questions all parts of a student's dossier. For example, a student may not have a lot of clubs or leadership positions listed on her application because she was working after school or helping to care for younger siblings so her single mom could work. Admitting

such a student to honors hardly constitutes a lowered standard of excellence; instead, it re-envisioned valued traditional standards such as “commitment to service” or “work ethic” that we value when linked to the same type of activities framed as “tutoring children from disadvantaged backgrounds” or “volunteering in a soup kitchen” or “principal cellist for the youth orchestra.”

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.

High-quality, experientially based education for high-ability and highly motivated students from diverse backgrounds is an academic mix that not only improves our institutions but can improve our world, globally and locally. Diversity is important as more than an abstract, theoretical concept. Honors can play a powerful role in teaching justice. Inclusive excellence helps situate learning in a meaningful context that enriches students’ understanding of complex social issues ranging from economic and health disparities to LGBT rights and cultural sensitivity. In this way, honors education can and should be a vehicle for promoting the public good, a cause that requires no justification.

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