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Presidential Speech

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Presidential Speech

NAOMI YAVNEH KLOS

Loyola University New Orleans

My children like to say that it is dangerous to ride on a plane or even an elevator with me. They know that, at some point, after the doors have closed or the seat belts are fastened, I am going to start talking about honors. As NCHC president this past year, I have had the honor to speak with a great many people about honors and, especially, to address the false dichotomy between “high ability” students, on the one hand, and those who have “high financial need” or are considered in some way “high risk”—students who are from low-income families or underrepresented groups or who have disabilities or who are first in their families to attend college. In airplanes and on elevators and on campuses and in organizational offices, I like to tell folks that NCHC member institutions are public and private, secular and faith-based, two- and four-year, R1s and PUIs. They are HBCUs and HSIs. They are in The Netherlands and China and Siberia and Alaska and Boston. Honors students come from all academic disciplines and are citizens, undocumented, first-generation, and veterans. They are LGBTQA, as well as Straight, they are cisgender, transgender, and non-binary, and they represent the full spectrum of racial and ethnic diversity in this country.

That's what I say in the elevator, in public. Here in this room, among ourselves, we know that honors is sometimes constructed as a locus of privilege, raising the rankings of its institution by using restrictive models of admission that fail to recognize the role of systemic bias in the traditional metrics of academic excellence. For example, we know—and have known for a very long time—that SAT and ACT tests favor the children of white, affluent, college-educated parents. They also offer an advantage to those whose parents can afford test-prep tutoring and who can pay for their children to take the test multiple times if necessary. We now have a mechanism in place that boosts that advantage: superscoring! So why, let me ask, beloved honors community, do we still rely on these tests for admission to honors and for high-stakes scholarships, even at some “test optional” institutions? And when we do, why are we surprised that an honors college (or program) might be “whiter” than its institution as a whole?

Even more holistic admissions processes may skew in favor of certain students, as when we focus on how many AP classes a student has taken but bypass the valedictorian at the underfunded school that offers no AP and only 10% of whose graduates go on to college—or when we look at a résumé (rather than a list) of extracurricular activities that doesn't value “working in the family gas station/convenience store” or “baby-sitting my siblings” or “mowing lawns” as highly as “captain of the lacrosse team” or “unpaid internship at [my dad's friend's] law firm” or “tutoring underprivileged children in Ghana.” I am not saying that athletics or internships or tutoring are not worthy activities, but they cannot be the only measure of a student's worth. I am a champion of community engagement and volunteering but also somewhat suspicious of voluntourism that doesn't require substantive reflection or of double hours earned by stocking the food pantry at an inconvenient hour.

Then, once students are on campus, are we inadvertently sending a message of who does and does not belong through prompts and support mechanisms that privilege certain viewpoints or experiences? For example, is a student whose first language is not English best served by a writing center with a policy of not correcting grammar?

I am excited by the work that all of you are doing on your campuses and that NCHC is doing by discussing alternative metrics for admissions, new success scripts, and other efforts to recruit, retain, and graduate more students from marginalized backgrounds. Still, there is work to be done reframing the question, in moving far beyond “how can we get more X students in honors?” to creating and understanding the value of an inclusive community.

As Georgetown historian Marcia Chatelain has written in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about her work with students who are first in their families to attend college, “[They] are not recipients of institutional benevolence. Rather, they are members of our communities who remind us of our need to confront our histories of exclusion and choose a future of inclusion.” I would just say, they are members of our communities. Period.

Fr Greg Boyle, SJ—founder of Homeboy Industries and author of *Tattoos on the Heart*, a beloved first-year read in many Jesuit honors programs—wrote, “When we stand on the margins, the margins are erased.” Honors is not a checklist of experiences but a community of relationships, and we are each strengthened by being part of a welcoming, inclusive community. If we want to teach our students to listen respectfully to others with divergent opinions, if we want them to be consensus builders who work collaboratively to find solutions, they must be educated in a diverse, inclusive community. Let’s remember, too, that the margins are fluid and that we have a history of change for the better. What is transgressive now is status quo tomorrow. How many people in this room know what the term “parietal hours” means?

At the turn of the twentieth century, most colleges and universities denied access to women, to people of color, to Catholics, to Jews. Back before Jews were considered white people, all four of my grandparents were refugees. My father, Raphael Yavneh, was the first in his family to graduate not just from college but from high school. My mother’s mother, Grandma Anne, came to New York from Romania just a year before WWI began. Because New York City at that time, almost uniquely, was committed to free higher education for girls with high academic ability regardless of religion, ethnicity, or race, Grandma—a Jewish immigrant whose first language was Yiddish—went to college. She couldn’t major in physics (I guess they weren’t *that* enlightened at Hunter), but she could minor in it and major in math. Grandma got married after her junior year, but she still finished college, even when she became pregnant. A physical exam was required for graduation, but the doctor (a woman) who examined my very gravid grandmother simply ignored her giant belly and passed her without comment.

Grandma raised her children, including as a single mother during the four years of WWII, while her engineer husband (also an immigrant with a free education at New York’s Cooper Union) served as a CB in the Pacific theater. In her 50s, she went back to school, earning a master’s at Columbia and then teaching at a rural high school, where she prepared students for college. Grandma was the one the kids always asked to chaperone the dance, and

she proudly displayed her “teacher of the year” snow shovel when we came to visit her home in Napanoch, New York.

So, first of all, a big shout out to my STEM grandma, who helped me with my trigonometry homework!

Also, a shout out to New York City, and to Hunter College, which was committed to free education for academically gifted girls and women, including poor immigrants whose résumé included “babysitting my younger siblings” and “working in the family linoleum store.”

We should also honor the high school guidance counselor, who saw Grandma’s ability and who told her, “You *can* go to college—it’s free and here’s a scholarship so you can buy your books” and even more importantly “You *should* go to college; you *belong* in college.”

I tell the story of Grandma Anne because when we share our authentic selves with our students or really anyone, they feel open to bringing their authentic selves as well. When a first-generation student looks at me, she might see a privileged, curly-haired, white woman. I look at her and see Grandma Anne. And when I tell her about my grandma, I generally find that she sees herself in Grandma Anne, and in me. I hope that, when I share the story of Grandma Anne with you, together we can see the power of honors education to transform lives.

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