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editor's introduction

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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The last issue of *JNCHC* (spring/summer 2019) included a Forum on “Current Challenges to Honors Education.” The essays focused on challenges to honors while this issue’s Forum addresses challenges within honors, especially the challenges we present to our students in courses that are designed to complicate, interrogate, and often defy accepted practices and beliefs. The introduction of risk-taking takes this topic beyond the unthreatening and inviting terrain of challenge into a different territory. Virtually all honors programs and colleges advertise themselves as presenting challenges to their students, but few if any boast that they are risky. Jumping hurdles is a challenge: jumping when you don’t know what is on the other side is risky. Risk involves some possibility of danger, and to varying degrees the essays in this issue’s Forum address not just the challenge but the risk for students, educators, and programs in honors.

The following Call for Papers was distributed in the NCHC newsletter, on the honors listserv, and in the previous issue of *JNCHC*:

The next issue of *JNCHC* (**deadline: September 1, 2019**) invites research essays on any topic of interest to the honors community.

The issue will also include a Forum focused on the theme “Risk-Taking in Honors.” 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, which is posted on the NCHC website <https://www.nchchonors.org/uploaded/NCHC_FILES/Pubs/Risky_Honors.pdf?1552674194168>, is by Andrew Cognard-Black. In his essay, “Risky Honors,” he surmises that honors educators almost all encourage their students to take risks. Starting with Joseph Cohen in 1966, a recurrent honors mantra has been that honors students “want to be ‘threatened,’ i.e., compelled to question and to reexamine”; they need and want to question their values and the values of their community. This mandate is now subsumed in the “critical thinking” movement. Cognard-Black challenges us to formulate strategies for implementing this mandate when we know that students have to weigh it against the importance of grades: “higher

education is clearly a high-stakes enterprise, and grades are the most visible currency in that enterprise.” The motivation for students to play it safe is real and compelling, so honors educators need to come up with strategies to encourage their students to take risks while at the same time acknowledging the forces that discourage them from doing so. Cognard-Black suggests one method [an “automatic A” grading policy] for resolving this tension and dares honors educators to come up with others.

In addition to meeting Cognard-Black’s challenge, Forum contributors might consider other questions such as the following:

- What might be the benefits and liabilities of the “automatic A” policy that Cognard-Black describes, and how could it be modified?
- If teachers reward students for risky behavior, is it really risky?
- Do teachers model risk aversion when they adopt grading or assessment policies that are required by their institution but that they find counter to their values?
- Tenure, promotion, and salary raises are the currency of academic employment in a way similar to the status of grades for students; are faculty members hypocritical when they preach risk-taking to students but play it safe in placing their personal advancement above, say, long-term research projects or commitments to teaching that do not yield such rewards?
- Is critical thinking so fully the lingua franca of the academic world now that it is the safe route for students rather than the risky path of stubbornly holding onto their cultural, intellectual, religious, or political beliefs?

Seven responses to this Call for Forum essays were accepted for publication.

In his lead essay, Andrew J. Cognard-Black weighs the importance of intellectual risk-taking in an honors education against the incentive to play it safe that is built into the institutional reward system, especially through the grading system. While inviting all readers to address this dilemma that honors students face through their college years, he offers one suggestion for risk management devised by a colleague at St. Mary’s College of Maryland: all students enter the class with an automatic A and maintain that grade as

long as they meet the class requirements, which are fairly rigorous. If they fail to meet the basic requirements, then they lose the “automatic A” and revert to the regular grading system. This strategy does not eliminate risk but does reduce or at least disguise it; the policy implies that intellectual risk need not be accompanied by academic risk or that, at least, the risk to a student’s academic success can and should be reduced.

Brian Davenport of Eastern Washington University addresses another kind of risk that goes beyond the intellectual or academic risk addressed by Cognard-Black. In “An Honors Student Walks into a Classroom: Inviting the Whole Student into our Classes,” Davenport advocates the risk that faculty members take when they interrogate and threaten their students’ deeply held beliefs, their “whole person.” He suggests not just critical thinking but critical reflection as a mode of transformative teaching and learning. He argues that, in a way that runs counter to traditional pedagogies, “we have an obligation to interact with [the] whole person, not simply the intellectual person” so that students can leave the honors classroom having accomplished “the truly difficult task of self-knowledge.”

Eric Lee Welch of the University of Kentucky offers a perspective similar to Davenport’s in “Risk that Lasts: Prioritizing Propositional Risk in Honors Education.” Welch contrasts “strategic risk,” which he sees as standard in the honors classroom, with deeper and more lasting “propositional risk.” He associates strategic risk with “intellectual jousting around the seminar table” whereas, in taking propositional risks, students “are willing to interrogate deeply held beliefs and to immerse themselves in the full complexity of attendant issues in order to refine or substantially alter their views.” Welch offers specific suggestions for implementing propositional risk in the classroom as well as the example of his study abroad class in Israel as an illustration of long-lasting and risky honors education.

In the current climate of higher education, the advocacy of risk by Cognard-Black and especially by Davenport and Welch confronts a new problem. In “Risky Triggers,” Larry R. Andrews of Kent State University essentially agrees with all three of these authors, but he introduces serious questions about addressing the “whole person” or encouraging “propositional risk” given the new sensitivity to traumas and discomforts that at least some honors students are likely to have experienced in their past. In the era of “trigger warnings,” addressing standard academic materials is risky enough, much less threatening students’ basic beliefs. Andrews believes, though, that if we create in our classrooms “a free, open, and nurturing learning environment, a space

safe enough for them to take on emotional as well as intellectual risks,” then students can better deal with their demons and can flourish both in the classroom and in their lives beyond college.

With previous essays having considered intellectual, personal, ideological, and emotional risk-taking, the next essay adds consideration of the body. In “Embodied Risk-Taking: Embracing Discomfort through Image Theatre,” Leah White describes the competency development model at Minnesota State University, Mankato, which “depends heavily on self-awareness gained through reflection” and that must be risky for students in order to be meaningful. White’s strategy for achieving this goal is “to get them out of their heads by using their bodies in a series of theatre exercises.” Adapting Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the course centers on collaborative student creation of a performance that addresses social justice issues in their community. As a means of overcoming the discomfort and self-consciousness that honors students often feel about their bodies as well as about issues of social oppression, “theatre becomes a common language through which students can begin taking risks with new concepts and ideas” and gives them “space to be physically present in their learning, not just intellectually engaged.”

Another strategy for encouraging risk-taking through introduction to new ideas and unfamiliar experiences is study abroad. Many study abroad programs promise risk-free adventure, assuring students and parents that safety is a primary factor in the proposed experience. In “Academic Risk and Intellectual Adventure: Evidence from U.S. Honors Students at the University of Oxford,” Elizabeth Baigent of the University of Oxford describes a program that promises risk rather than safety. Wycliffe Hall’s Scholars’ Semester in Oxford (SSO) for Registered Visiting Students at the University of Oxford, Baigent writes, is a seriously risky intellectual adventure based on rigorous academic study. Experiencing temporal as well as geographical dislocation, given the ancient traditions of Oxford University, students learn to deconstruct common misunderstandings of both British and American history while undertaking an ambitious academic project within the unfamiliar traditions of an Oxford education.

Intellectual and cultural risk-taking is also the subject of “Disorienting Experiences: Guiding Faculty and Students Toward Cultural Responsiveness” by Rebekah Dement and Angela Salas of Indiana University Southeast (IUS). The context of this risk-taking is contrary to that of the Oxford program, however, since IUS is a rural and predominantly white institution where “challenging deeply ingrained mindsets, particularly those pertaining

to issues of class and race, becomes a risk-taking endeavor for instructor and student alike.” The essay focuses primarily on the risk that teachers take in assigning subject matter that proves unexpectedly risky to their students. Dement describes the discomfort and antagonism she encountered in assigning Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* and the impatience of her students in reading Rick Bragg’s *All Over But the Shoutin’*, when one student commented “There’s only so much empathy we can have.” However, with the guidance of her mentor, Angela Salas, teaching culturally challenging texts started leading to significant cultural responsiveness in Dement’s students as she modeled “the vulnerability and openness to growth necessary for such experiences to change us.”

Like Dement and Salas, Alicia Cunningham-Bryant focuses primarily on the risks taken by faculty in “Practicing What We Preach: Risk-Taking and Failure as a Joint Endeavor.” She also answers Cognard-Black’s challenge to come up with strategies that make honors seem less daunting; while Cognard-Black suggested an “automatic A” policy, Cunningham-Bryant describes an experiment at Westminster College that is riskier for the teacher: having honors students grade themselves. She describes how the pilot project worked in multiple team-taught sections of the first-year, second-semester honors seminar. Overall, the project was, in a word, a failure. “While self-grading was originally intended to provide increased freedom for risk-taking, in truth it led to increased anxiety in students and high levels of frustration for faculty.” The project did, however, raise a number of interesting questions about risk-taking among both students and faculty and about the cultural mores that work against the success of taking significant risks in academia. Cunningham-Bryant thus provides a provocative conclusion to this Forum on “Risk-Taking in Honors.”

Many of the Forum essays focused on the personal development of honors students through risk-taking. The first research essay in this issue of *JNCHC* continues this focus in describing “organizational activity games” at Siberian Federal University (SibFU) in Krasnoyarsk, Russia. In “The Game as an Instrument of Honors Students’ Personal Development in the SibFU Honors College,” Maria V. Tarasova makes the point that “The organizers of honors programs always take risks when they opt for innovative approaches in teaching and learning, but the risks are justified when the innovative pedagogy leads honors education toward achieving its goals.” She describes the history, theory, practice, and goals of games in the SibFU Honors College, showing how games relate to the principles of honors education.

Organizational activity games (OAG) served as the structural design of this pioneering honors program in Russia, creating “the honors college as a novel and different learning environment” and enabling students to act as “leaders of their education and creators of their unique learning trajectories.” Any of the nine types of games developed by Georgii Petrovich Shchedrovitskii “can be performed with students, faculty, or staff members as players,” and the rules “allow students to take roles of professionals, scientists, or managers of education, for instance.” In her detailed account of how the games have been adopted at the SibFU Honors College, Tarasova provides a model that could be adopted at any university.

Honors programs and colleges in the U.S. and elsewhere struggle continuously to find the best admissions criteria and to measure the effectiveness of the different options in best serving their programs, institutions, and students. An original approach to this topic is the subject of “Selection Criteria for the Honors Program in Azerbaijan” by Azar Abizada of ADA University and Fizza Mirzaliyeva of The Institute of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The authors describe the three criteria used in their program, all of which are generally effective predictors of student success: “(i) student performance in the centralized university admission test; (ii) student performance in the first year of studies; and (iii) student performance in the honors program selection test.” What distinguishes their research from other studies of admissions criteria, however, is that Abizada and Mirzaliyeva then measure the effectiveness of different ones of these criteria in predicting student success in different disciplines: Business and Economics; Engineering; Education; Arts; and International Relations and Law. They determine, for instance, that “in Business and Economics, Engineering, and Arts, all three variables are significant at some level whereas in Education the state admission test score is not significant, and in International Relations and Law none of the variables are significant predictors.” This methodology could have a significant impact on honors programs that adopted this form of correlation between disciplinary success and admissions criteria, perhaps discovering that, like the honors program in Azerbaijan, we might find a better method for admissions than applying the same criteria to all disciplines.

The final essay in this issue of *JNCHC* is a collaboration between six authors from different schools but with a single thesis. The title is “Purpose, Meaning, and Exploring Vocation in Honors Education,” and the authors are Erin VanLaningham of Loras College; Robert J. Pampel of Saint Louis University; Jonathan Kotinek and Dustin J. Kemp of Texas A&M University;

Aron Reppmann of Trinity Christian College; and Anna Stewart of Valparaiso University. The authors write that the term “vocation” in higher education refers to a discernment process focused on deep understanding of an individual’s purpose in the world. Given the definition and context of “vocation” in this sense of the word, the essay echoes many of the perspectives voiced in the Forum on Risk-Taking. The authors set out to examine “the sorts of curricular and advising steps we should make to dissolve the boundary between personal and professional goals, the heart’s desire and the mind’s abilities.” After reviewing the substantial scholarship on the discourse on vocational discernment, the authors suggest ways to integrate vocation in all stages of an honors education. The broad outline of the phases they suggest for this integration, each amplified in considerable detail with examples from their various institutions, is: cultivating individual reflection and community in the First Year; adopting e-portfolios as a regular component of honors courses; and exploring vocation in a personal and communal as well as practical context as part of advising and senior experiences. The authors conclude that the concept of vocational discernment—as manifested, for instance, in Ignatian pedagogy—is already compatible with honors education and that the overlap between the two fields reinforces the goal of encouraging “personal fulfillment as well as intellectual talent, largely by integrating a focus on a meaningful and purposeful life.”

