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Inclusive Excellence in Honors Education

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Inclusive Excellence in Honors Education

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Inclusive Excellence in Honors Education¹

Defining Honors Education

The National Collegiate Honors Council is a distinctive educational organization founded in 1956 and designed to support and promote undergraduate honors education. NCHC has nearly 900 member institutions—including Marshall University—that directly impact over 330,000 honors students in the United States. According to the NCHC, an honors college is an academic unit on a collegiate campus responsible for “devising and delivering in-class and extracurricular academic experiences that provide a *distinctive* learning environment for *selected* students” (NCHC 2013; emphasis added). Further, NCHC states that an honors college provides

measurably broader, deeper, and more complex learning-centered and learner-directed experiences for its students than are available elsewhere in the institution. These opportunities are appropriately tailored to fit the institution’s culture and mission and frequently occur within a close community of students and faculty. In most cases, the honors community is composed of carefully selected teachers and students who form a cross- or multi-disciplinary cohort dedicated to achieving exceptional learning and personal standards.

Importantly, the NCHC’s definition brings to our attention two essential elements to explore in the process of strategic planning. Specifically, an honors college must make essential decisions about what makes it distinct within a larger university environment and how those distinctions, which we will generally understand as constituting the particular experiences of students in the college, are achieved—at least in part—through *selective* membership achieved through a particular admissions process. In the same document, NCHC also enumerates several “modes of honors learning” that are intended to complement and supplement the definition of honors education—providing broad outlines for points of distinction in the approach of honors education. These so-called modes can be seen manifest in different ways in the curricular elements of this strategic plan. These are neither ranked nor mutually exclusive.

1. Research and Creative Scholarship (Learning in Depth)
2. Breadth and Enduring Questions (Inter- or Multi-disciplinary Learning)
3. Service Learning and Scholarship (Community Engagement)
4. Experiential Learning
5. Learning Communities

Honors Education at Marshall University

In today’s Honors College at Marshall University, outstanding undergraduates from each of the university’s *degree-granting* colleges participate in curricular and co-curricular opportunities designed to help them explore varied areas of interest, work collaboratively across differences, and develop as creative problem solvers with global perspectives who possess sought-after social and intellectual skills. As an essential part of a public university, it is the responsibility of the Honors College to help bring together students to live and work together from diverse backgrounds who variously identify, believe, and behave differently and hold wide-ranging interests. We know that broadly defined and realized diversity on campus provides the greatest potential for transformative educational opportunities that allow students to learn deeply about themselves and others while becoming effective and empathetic citizens of the world who are well-positioned to imagine and help shape the kind of world in which they want to live.

¹ This publication was originally prepared as a report to the Dean of the Honors College at Marshall University in June 2020 by then Associate Dean, Dr. Brian A. Hoey. It was then included (unchanged) as an appendix in the [Strategic Plan of the Honors College at Marshall University, 2023-2028](#), which was released 08 June 2023.

Personal Introduction

At least at this point in what must be considered a thoughtful process of reflective inquiry, dialog, and action, this document is the product of an individual. For that reason, and in recognition of the mandates of the writer's discipline of anthropology, which has long grappled with how to address such issues as identity, representation and authority, the ideas in this text will be delivered in the first person—when appropriate.² As I have conducted the research upon which the discussion here is based and made choices as to how to parse that material, meaningfully present it, and ultimately provide some coherent analysis through which others might consider their own positions as well as potential courses of action, it will be me speaking professionally with an explicit acknowledgment of my positionality, as a person, to the material and, of course, the topics at hand. With that in mind, let me begin with a bit of background to my work here.

As I began in administration at the Honors College at Marshall University in mid-2018, I started reading about how other honors college and program administrators have addressed the charge of “elitism” that is sometimes leveled at their institutional practices and the ideas (if not always the ideals) on which they are based. Looking back on that preliminary inquiry, I see how the questions that it raised for me are salient for the historical moment in which we find ourselves today. No doubt given where I am positioned as a middle-class, white male, I felt little urgency at the time of my early inquiry into the potential validity of charges of elitism against the practice (if not the stated mission) of post-secondary honors education. Since then and in light of what I have learned upon broadening and deepening my inquiry, I have become convinced that “business as usual” in honors education generally, and at Marshall particularly, is not a viable option.

Historical Context of Honors Education

Although honors education in the United States may trace its ideological and methodological roots to certain European educational models with their own long histories, attempts to emulate elements of these practices began under a coherent banner in the late-nineteenth century and later experienced periods of rapid growth in the 1920s and, again, during widespread post-WWII institutional expansion in higher education lasting through the 1950s and 60s. It was, in fact, an influx of American scholars returning from training in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century that accelerated the trend to create distinct “honors” educational experiences. The reliance today within honors upon such standards as the seminar and more intimate, personalized, and active instruction akin to tutorial methods, generally, is a legacy of these relatively proximate European roots.

The “honors project” now encompasses most attempts at differentiated instruction intended for students deemed higher-achieving or “gifted” in institutions of higher education and coincides historically with a movement to provide for such students at the pre-collegiate level (Rinn 2006). Joy Pehlke (2003) notes that honors developed—as is true of educational programs for students deemed gifted generally—in much the same way as “remedial” programs. In both, there is explicit recognition that different students have different needs and that certain groups of students have broadly shared needs that may be atypical of the majority of the student body. Speaking to his experience in honors at Radford University, Earl Brown refers to honors as “alternative education” where emphasis is not (as may be widely thought outside of honors) on “acceleration and quantity of work required but on depth and *kind* of work” (1990, 15; emphasis added).

In her historical analysis of honors education, Anne Rinn (2006) suggests that it was during the post-WW II period of dramatic institutional expansion and explosive enrollment that those in higher education were confronted with what they took as a challenge to provide for the needs of those students appearing to

² For an in-depth discussion of contemporary anthropological approaches to race, please consider exploring a project sponsored by the American Anthropological Association titled “Understanding Race” and available at <https://www.understandingrace.org/>.

them as both willing and able to take on greater educational challenges than the majority of their peers. For many in what may be recognized as an honors “movement,” addressing these needs was a way of promising that these manifestly talented and self-motivated students would not be limited in ability to reach their fullest intellectual potential within a system purposefully geared to the average student.

As the early movement’s de facto leader, Frank Aydelotte brought pedagogical models observed from his experience as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University to his post as president of Swarthmore in the 1920s where an influential honors program was started and, in his zeal, contributed most impactfully to solidifying arguments both for and against honors education. For Aydelotte (1944, 28), creating honors education was a simple matter of providing for a neglected but specially deserving category of student—the seemingly most talented—by “breaking the academic lock step” that characterized what he described as typical college instruction in order to provide more challenging opportunities for these “abler” students. For critics who question the selectivity at the base of honors education—both then and now—it is a simple matter of elitism.

Honors Education’s Development Since its Origins

Speaking to the charge of elitism, Norm Weiner (2009) asserts that while the ideals of honors were first imported from Europe into the context of an already selective United States college population serving children of the upper socioeconomic class in the first-half of the twentieth century, honors has moved almost entirely into the context of public universities. Today no ivy league school has a university-wide honors program. This is to suggest, that at least in some significant respects, the basic practice of honors education—now in much different institutional contexts with substantially different student populations—has changed since its origins. For many of the students now choosing to participate in honors programs, this participation is at least partly motivated by a personal and/or familial commitment to social mobility and comes with recognition that opportunities afforded in honors education improve their credentials (Jones 2017). These personal concerns are entirely consistent with the broad mandate for public higher education. Honors programs at such institutions have served as a comparatively cost-effective means for underserved students, generally, including first-generation students from all manner of ethnic and socioeconomic background, to gain the demonstrable benefits of pedagogies typical of elite, private colleges, and universities.

At the same time and well outside of that mandate, there are institutional motivations to develop honors programs in order to attract and retain students considered more intellectually motivated and whom might otherwise be expected to go to more prestigious colleges and universities in the absence of such programs. As noted by Pehlke (2003, 28; emphasis added) “by drawing a solid core of high-achieving students, [public colleges and universities] hope to improve their standing with the public and with state lawmakers, as well as to raise the academic bar for *all* their students.”

Writing of another highly influential and more contemporary leader in honors education, Finnie Coleman (2017, 325) describes Edward Funkhouser’s recognition, as head of Texas A&M’s honors program beginning in the mid-1990s, of the potential for a more thoroughly modern and progressive mission for honors education whereby honors programs actively serve to foster excellence well outside their limited population of students through “shaping campus climate, driving community relations; and fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion for faculty, staff and students across campus, not just in honors.” Speaking of the experience of West Virginia University, President E. Gordan Gee has asserted the value of honors programs in the context of the public university where students in honors have access to the kinds of educational experiences that they would otherwise be unable to afford at elite, private colleges. Gee’s assertion, however, goes beyond the individual benefits provided to honors students that I suggested earlier.

According to Gee (2015, 179; emphasis added), “When we bring more honors students to our campus, we are raising the level of discussion in every classroom, not just honors classes. When we have more

students who know how to balance working smart and playing smart, we are helping teach *all* our students how to work and play smarter. When we have more students engaged in going first in the classroom, we create an environment where more are encouraged to go out into the world with boldness and confidence.” Such a present-day assertion—that honors is valuable in that it confers benefits well beyond any institutionally imposed limits to direct access to honors education—is consistent with Funkhouser’s own assertion that it is the responsibility of higher education administration to provide honors programs so that they can “model the ideal education and champion innovative pedagogical practices so that how faculty members taught in honors could be emulated across the academic enterprise” (Coleman 2017, 325). In this way, the success of an honors program might be measured not simply by how well it served its own students, but also in how well it elevates the educational experience for a much broader selection of students—should it be possible to clearly determine that outcome.

Considering the shifted context and consequent mission of honors education since Aydelotte’s time, generally, and with assertions as to broad-based benefits, particularly, the barest charges of elitism may be at least somewhat blunted. At the same time, Amberly Dzieszinski (2017, 83; emphasis added) and her co-authors suggest that while it is true that because honors programs at most public universities “recruit students who come from relatively less privileged backgrounds compared to students who attend more elite schools, it is easy to forget that within the same institution, the honors students are *still more likely to come from backgrounds of relative privilege compared to their non-honors peers.*”

Privilege in Honors?

It appears that some measure of “privilege” as a descriptor is likely to adhere to honors. Speaking as an honors administrator at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, David Jones has found that it is all the more important that “With limited resources being the norm, we in honors must be prepared to explain why our programs do not reinforce a system of privilege and elitism within our institutions” (Jones 2017, p. 67). At his university, this entails not only demonstrating the impact of their program well outside of honors through well-collected and analyzed data, but also “actively communicating to interested audiences that pedagogical innovations within our honors program can be piloted in a supportive context and adapted elsewhere on campus over time ... [and that these initiatives] can include inclusive and culturally relevant pedagogy, as well as other pedagogical methods that foster student equity” (ibid.).

In other words, what one could and probably should say is that honors education must not be an upgrade to “flying first class” from the economy class of public education such that those upgraded students are entitled to special treatment—including such perks as priority registration, easier access to advising, and better dorms—merely because they scored above an arbitrary threshold on standardized tests that an increasing number of critics consider of doubtful equity and value (cf. Knudson 2011). There is no benefit conferred on the many coach passengers by those who fly in comfort up front and behind the curtain for having actual legroom as well as free drinks.

It might be understandable how we could end up at such a point of entitlement. In the determined effort of public universities and colleges to secure greater “prestige” by luring top-of-class high school students with outstanding scores who might otherwise attend a prominent private institution, honors programs have been offered as a means for these students to obtain some comparable level of academic challenge and more engaging encounters with both course material and faculty. At the same time, such programs are often marketed in terms that are easily comparable to something like concierge treatment in health care. And, it is a fact that for the majority of these programs, such hands-on treatment is effectively reserved for the most privileged among students at any institution.

Writing in an oft-cited article in the *Chronicle for Higher Education*, Kevin Knudson (2011) emphasizes to his readers, as well as prospective students to his own honors program at the University of Florida, that honors must be seen *first* as a significant but enriching *challenge* for students and not taken as a reward for a previous job well-done. Further, Knudson holds that honors at the university level must be seen as necessarily entailing a “culture of engagement” that pushes boundaries and improves the educational

experience for all. That, at least, might avoid a tendency for at least some number of honors students to simply fulfill basic requirements and enjoy perks of membership. All well and good, Pehlke (2003, 27; emphasis added) might say, but “If we in the academy are to believe that honors programs produce the honorable benefits they claim to, a closer look may be in order. I fear that the *questions of access and privilege call the underlying crux of ‘honor’ into question*. If institutions of higher education are serious about challenging the trends of social inequalities at the doors of the academy, then the doors of honors should be open as well.” With that tough assertion, let us turn to the basic question of access on which so much of any debate turns.

Selectivity and Access

Honors programs selectively draw on and directly serve a segment of the student body who are recognized in what are held as some meaningful way as “higher-achieving” than the majority of their peers. As pointed out by Rew Godow (1990, 64), “Many seem to believe that elitism and selectivity are the same thing, and so they find it difficult to figure out how to be against elitism and still introduce some selectivity into honors programs. The result . . . is some confusing talk which makes a lot of people who, in their desire to be against elitism, sound as if they also think that selectivity is a bad thing.” For Godow—and I think for nearly all honors administrators—it is both possible and necessary to distinguish between a state of elitism, as something pernicious and undemocratic, and compelling arguments for some form of selectivity. Among those who recognize that students both willing and able to take on additional educational challenges beyond those pursued by most students—perhaps with appropriate support, in some cases—should be given special opportunities to pursue them, there appears unanimous agreement that selectivity, in some form, is both an essential and appropriate starting point to first recognizing and then serving these students. So, what to make of the practice of selecting?

Assuming that honors education will continue to serve some smaller population of students—a subset of a much larger body of students within a larger institution—who have been somehow identified as either “deserving” or “needing” special attention in their education, then how should selection of these students be conducted?³ It is without exaggeration to say that this question is central to every debate concerning how to address questions of inclusive excellence. For now, I will simply look at some basics. Later, as I explore possible courses of action, there will be much more discussion of the issues that relate to particular practices of admission to honors programs. Returning first to Godow, we can take note that some thirty years ago, honors administrators were questioning what was then—and what continues to be—a heavy reliance on standardized test scores and grade point averages as ways of admitting students.

³ I will note here that as a faculty member, in particular, I feel strongly that the benefits afforded honors students such as smaller, more intimate, and often particularly innovative classes and individualized faculty mentoring should serve as illustrations of the kinds of opportunities and experiences we should strive to create for all students. As has already been suggested, there are varying forms of what could be described as “spillover” benefit accrued outside of honors. Some of this is presumably achieved through particular experiences of students that inform edifying actions and interactions throughout the university as when a faculty member develops an innovative honors seminar and then uses what they learn to shape what they then do in their regular coursework. This spillover is certainly not the same as making all that we recognize as beneficial to honors students and faculty a standard for an entire university. Frankly, given the trends in higher education and the budgetary constraints that most public colleges and universities like Marshall now face—all the more substantial given revenue shortfalls precipitated by the coronavirus pandemic—it is exceedingly unlikely that anything like the changes required to achieve such a situation will be supported. Nearly every indicator suggests precisely the opposite—we are moving away from practices that were once much closer to that standard. This leaves honors education within larger universities ever more exposed as something of an elite (or at least selective) holdout that may look more like some kind of an institutional “attic” in which to relegate past (even if once highly regarded) practice than as a center of contemporary innovation capable of enriching a larger, institution that may be functionally hollowed-out by sharp cuts. It is already clear what this regrettable trend will mean for higher education generally. What will it mean for honors education, in particular, if it is left in the attic?

In this, Godow asserted that “If our principles dictate, as I think they must, that we not arbitrarily exclude people, then our practices must coincide” (1990, 8).

Among the first points made in nearly all reviews of admission practices in honors is that quantitative measures do not always provide a means of finding the most promising and capable students given that for some significant number of students, their particular achievements, abilities, and potential are not well captured by grades and test scores. In their thoughtful article attempting inclusive excellence in honors at the University of Maryland at Baltimore, Simon Stacey and Jodi Kelber-Kaye (2018) point out that, while there continues to be some dissent on the issue, there is convincing evidence that what they describe as “underrepresented minority” students and African-Americans, in particular, are put at a disadvantage by reliance on standardized tests in admissions.⁴ To continue to rely on quantitative measures primarily or even exclusively is to, de facto, accept that this is not only a reliable measure of past achievement and future potential but also that it is fair to all.

Openness to Critical Review

The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), which provides honors educators and administrators with a professional organization through which they can share experiences and seek guidance, was founded in 1966—in the midst of an era of widespread civil rights protests and groundbreaking legislation. Nearly thirty years later, the NCHC defined the basic characteristics of what they described as a “fully developed” honors program as a rough measure—if not a standard—of appropriate practice. On the issues at hand today, this document, which emphasizes the need for such valuable things as experiential education, community service, and a curriculum that constitutes some 20-25 percent of a student’s coursework, fails to meaningfully tackle issues of diversity, inclusion, or equity. Given the social justice milieu into which the organization was born, that is especially disappointing. The only update since 1994 has been, in 2008, to add the characteristic of providing priority registration to honors students. Despite the fact that this document offers little perspective on the topic at hand—unless by omission—it does offer the following as Item 14: “The fully-developed Honors Program must be *open to continuous and critical review and be prepared to change to maintain its distinctive position* of offering distinguished education to the best students in the institution” (National Collegiate Honors Council 1994; emphasis added). For now, I will not address what it might mean to identify the “best” students. Rather, I will use the highlighted portion of this item from the NCHC to point to a need for critical review and change to make honors education the best that it can be.

Reflecting on how the multitude of changes wrought on college campuses in the wake of the coronavirus have affected honors education, such as at Columbia College where he directs the program, John Zubizarreta refers to one specific matter—long one for which there has been great resistance in honors—that may now be considered anew. We are collectively, in honors and higher education generally, compelled by events to undergo critical review while being prepared to change. As Zubizarreta suggests, with what was “normal” fundamentally disrupted, we may have in honors (as elsewhere) an opportunity for critical self-examination. His example of an opportunity for re-examination is that of resistance in honors to remote learning as he explains here:

Undoubtedly, the sudden demand to ‘go remote’ has upended much of what we have always done well in honors and why and how we have done it. The need to adapt has been difficult, but it has also opened new opportunities, new avenues for rethinking and redesigning our pedagogical approaches. For instance, perhaps now honors is ready to reconsider the notion that honors and “distance learning” are antithetical propositions. Having been compelled to adapt to remote teaching, learning, and program management in order to continue to challenge, encourage,

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, I have retained the categorical terms used by authors for socially recognized demographic groups in cited sources. The ways we variously describe and classify persons have always been fraught with problems. Further, for a variety of reasons, the terms that stand for these descriptive categories can be both highly contested and subject to equally contested revisions over time.

support, and reward our students (and faculty), perhaps now we can reimagine how the honors experience can be sustained and even enhanced by technology” (John Zubizarreta 2020, 2).

While online education may not be immediately germane to the subject of equity and inclusion, it is entirely appropriate to any consideration of “access” and the differential nature of access—whether that be to technology or, simply, to a physical campus where face-to-face honors courses may be otherwise exclusively taught. The larger point that I am making here, however, is that for all of the hardship that we collectively face in this time of pandemic disease and societal turmoil, it is also an opportunity to challenge ourselves to think and act differently going forward for an even greater good. That is what I aim to do with this report.

Inclusive Excellence

Having provided an overview of the basic history of honors education in the United States and with some consideration of aspects of selectivity and access, I will turn now to a more detailed examination of inclusive excellence in honors. In their own examination of diversity in honors, Peter Long and John Falconer (2003, 54) make the simple but significant observation that while public regional universities, like Marshall University, are often the most accessible for minority students, this accessibility does not always match with the idea and, perhaps the particular practices, of a selective honors program within these institutions. Following this point, they assert that because of the position of honors programs and, as at Marshall, the mandate to serve all colleges on campus, they are often highly visible and can thus send important signals about the institution’s support for people of all backgrounds.

As suggested by Dail Mullins (2005) fifteen years ago, admissions criteria in honors have been shifting away from more traditional models primarily or exclusively reliant on quantitative measures to a more diverse and complex array of factors with the intent (possibly one among others) to improve the recruitment and representation of historically under-represented students who, while not having the scores, have demonstrated great ambition and promise real contributions that are not simply academic in nature. At least some of the programs making the shift have explicitly stated that their move was intended not only to meet goals of “diversity,” by some measure—perhaps to align with previously or newly held ideals of equity and fairness and even commitments to social justice—but also to create what I might describe as an “intentional community” within honors where, as noted by Mullins, this may mean “bringing students of proven high academic ability and privileged educational backgrounds together with those who may lack these advantages but who clearly show promise and ambition” to learn from each other (2005, 22). Thus, meaningfully attending to deficits in diversity may be a means to improve educational outcomes for all.

Educational systems in the United States have long sorted and placed students within different “tracks” (most simply recognized at the secondary level as “college-bound” and “vocational”) according to their apparent attainment of certain culturally informed academic ideals. Evidence from social science has nearly as long identified that this process (or perhaps “processing”) contributes to increased inequality and inequity. When people speak of such things as racism being “structural” in nature, this practice can be recognized as a potentially significant part of that structure. Speaking to this, Graeme Harper finds that it must “prompt us to ask if we in college honors education, for all our promotion of community service and support for aspiration and recognition of commitment and touting of the foundational importance of a civic responsibility, are in fact contributing to societal inequity rather than challenging it” (2018, 2).

Admissions in Honors: Skimming and Holistic Models

Following a review of both national and international honors program selection processes for incoming, first-year students, Richard Stoller (2004, 79) suggests that there are two basic types which he characterizes as “skimming” and “free-standing.” The former constitutes those practices based on quantitative measures while the other—more typically referred to in the literature as “holistic”—entails a much wider range of criteria and may, in some cases, dispose of standardized test scores and other such

arbitrary markers all together. Essentially, Stoller finds a continuum of practice from the strictly quantitative to the strictly qualitative assessment of students for the purpose of admission. Stoller describes how

In the skimming selection model, usually called “by invitation” or something similar, the overall flow of applications to the institution is scrutinized according to some numerical threshold—generally some combination of SAT/ACT and GPA/rank. Intake may be limited by fixed program capacity (starting downward from the “top student” until offer capacity is reached) or by fixed entry criteria (all applicants with the specified criteria are offered honors admission) (Stoller 2004, 79).

At Marshall University, we currently operate a skimming selection process “by invitation” with intake entailing fixed, solely numeric entry criteria. Why do programs as we have at Marshall adhere to the quantitative side of the continuum? Clearly, from an institutional point of view, at least, there are benefits. The process is essentially one of “set it and forget it” wherein very little or no additional program-level expense is required for staffing or paperwork—unless there are some allowances for “exceptions,” but these are likely minimal and possibly wholly dependent on the initiative of a student to challenge existing criteria in light of their particular circumstances. As Stoller describes, a skimming model *generally* avoids outright rejection of students. Rejection is made *only implicitly* by having not received an offer of admission. Institutionally-speaking, and through the lens of recruitment, such a process might avoid alienating high-achieving applicants, who are just under the given threshold for admission to honors. From the point of view of students, as well, there is an undeniable simplicity to the model given the lack of any paperwork burden—either you’ve cleared the bar, or you haven’t. There’s nothing that you need (or most likely can) do. Without an individual case to be made, there are only scores automatically reported. Of course, there is no doubt some students for whom this inherently closed procedure is profoundly alienating if they stop to consider that an alternative model could be used that is more sensitive to the particulars of student experience.

As for downsides to skimming’s reliance on standardized test scores and high school GPAs, we already have a good sense of that. Calls for admission reform, generally, in higher education have focused on large gaps in mathematical and verbal standardized test scores when race is considered, particularly for African-Americans when compared to both Hispanic and Caucasian students. Research suggests that these gaps may be due to implicit racial biases in the composition of exams themselves and the verbal portion, in particular, or to uneven access to high-quality education as well as relative lack of financial and social access to such things as test preparation—though income alone does not explain a persistent gap in scores (VanZanten 2020). A report from the Brookings Institution found that evidence for a stubborn race gap on the SAT provides “a snapshot into the extraordinary magnitude of racial inequality in contemporary American society. Standardized tests are often seen as mechanisms for meritocracy, ensuring fairness in terms of access. But test scores reflect accumulated advantages and disadvantages in each day of life up the one on which the test is taken. Race gaps on the SAT hold up a mirror to racial inequities in society as a whole” (Reeves and Halikias 2017). Turning away from these tests to a more exclusive reliance on high school GPA, as an alternative, shows an ongoing commitment to setting a numeric threshold and offers another set of challenges born of the fact that these numbers too, for a variety of related but distinct reasons, are at best uncertain measures of academic (or other) potential. As suggested by Jones, such metrics as these were initially selected for honors admission “not because they were known as valid predictors of student success, but because they served as a tool for enrollment management” (2017, 46).

On the other end of the continuum from skimming are those admission procedures described as “free-standing” or, as I suggested earlier, holistic in nature. As explained by Stoller (2004), the most free-standing among them are, in fact, characterized by a process wherein only those applicants who take initiative to complete a separate honors program application—wholly supplemental to the institution’s

application for admission—are considered for honors. The fact that they are “above and beyond” applications makes them independent or free-standing. Typically, these applications contain elements such as essays, lists of accomplishments that are both academic and non-academic in nature, as well as letters of recommendation that all serve to go beyond the numbers. Operating under a free-standing model which entails careful, individualized review of these sorts of application materials requires considerable resources and, potentially, a significant institutional investment in honors staffing. At least some honors programs charge a fee with applications to help offset additional costs to this approach.⁵

For some number of students, the additional and potentially onerous step of applying to honors could preclude their seeking admission. In such a process, for those that do apply, if the program has fewer spots than applications, it would be necessary to outright reject students, which as noted previously might be gauged as undesirable at the institutional level. Despite potential risks to a free-standing, holistic application, Penn State’s honors college believes a significant recruitment benefit outweighs any potential loss of applicants. Specifically, they find that the process is a good “hook” that enables students to become familiar with honors at Penn State and, further, one that conveys a “regard *for the individual* that high-achieving prospects expect and generally receive from selective private institutions,” but not generally from large public universities like Penn State where its “on the numbers” approach to general admissions is justified based on logistics (Stoller 2004, 80; emphasis added).

Basic Issues Regarding Diversity in Honors

Without an understanding of the effects of social, cultural, and economic factors that systematically create advantage or disadvantage for certain students based largely on racial categories with which they are societally identified, it might seem simple to explain away the lack of racial or ethnic diversity within honors programs as a matter of lacking sufficient candidates who could be described as African-American, for example, and who are also qualified for admission based on credentials garnered through quantitative measures. As described by VanZanten (2020), with an understanding of differential success based on the impact of racial identification, one finds that the small pool of qualified candidates who are not white come from public schools that are, by and large, comparatively weak academically, “have fewer guidance counsellors, do not offer AP or IB programs, have greater student-teacher ratios, and are chronically underfunded.” Further, current demographic trends underscore the need for those in higher education, generally, to better understand best practices of recruitment, admission, and retention, generally, for increasingly diverse students in terms of race/ethnicity, age, and other identities as well as of low-income, and first generation college-bound status (Jones 2017).

At this point, we have considered “diversity” in a predominantly “compositional” or even “structural” form. There are, importantly, many other ways that diversity can and should be considered and measured and I will be exploring those later. For now, consider Coleman’s definition of “structural diversity” and her sense that it is but a starting point:

Structural diversity is essentially a census of an institution’s gender, racial, and ethnic composition: a snapshot of an institution’s demographic realities. We might reasonably expect that sufficient numerical or structural diversity provides the variety of personal experiences institutions need if they are to successfully pursue other forms of diversity. It is important, however, that we recognize that *numbers only provide the necessary foundation to succeed*; numbers do not guarantee success in improving campus climate, improvements in our efforts to become more inclusive, or a positive impact on the number of equitable outcomes we achieve (2017, 320; emphasis added).

⁵ Of course, any fees can become an additional hindrance to applications generally and perhaps particularly from those students that a “diversity initiative,” as it were, might be trying to reach.

As Coleman describes, attending to structural diversity through efforts in recruitment, admission, and retention can start a process that should move beyond simply counting who is at an institution (in compositional, numerical forms of diversity) to valuing who is within it as a community wherein people are given opportunities for genuine interaction and difference is not treated as a kind of commodity. Both Coleman (2017) and Jones (2017) visualize the end goal of a process that may begin with identifying underrepresentation and understanding structural inequalities as a “transformative diversity.” As Coleman envisions, transformative diversity ...

... actively cultivates, nurtures, and values what these individuals have to offer ... Beyond the important goals of fostering equity, inclusion, and social justice on our campuses, transformative diversity serves the important function of creating an environment where people are able to come together to address problems that their individual talents would not allow them to solve on their own. Here the dynamic shifts from providing utility to fostering synergy (2017, 324)

One must remember, however, that unequal access across society remains a systemic and intractable social problem that must be addressed meaningfully in our practices of recruitment, admissions, and retention before we might see a transformative diversity such as that described here in honors. One of the first steps, as Coleman suggests, is to reject using what she and others describe as a “deficit model” to thinking about diversity. This way of thinking focuses attention on diversity as a problem—as are *practices* that preclude any meaningful achievement of it—and thus tends to ignore substantial opportunities that a truly transformative diversity can provide. In short, focus on shared opportunities as a place to begin.

For a sobering perspective on how, at this moment in history, we are still at the beginning of what must be a demanding process of undoing systemic inequalities in American society—one that will require sacrifices by those who have wittingly or unwittingly benefitted from current arrangements—consider the recent *The New York Times* opinion piece by Erin Aubry Kaplan (July 06, 2020). Among other things, Kaplan asserts that “Racism is a form of convenience, in the sense that it’s designed to make life easier for its beneficiaries.” If one accepts her assertion, it is problematic to also uncritically accept a system of admission as worthy of being maintained by virtue of its convenience to the institution. And, if Benjamin Reese’s position in his piece in *Inside Higher Ed* is also to be accepted, simply “tweaking” the system now in place may end up, even if unintentionally, reinforcing existing structures of inequality—the language of “diversity” and “inclusion” should not, in this view, allow institutions to abdicate their responsibility to contribute to dismantling systems of structural inequality. Reese exclaims that while we may be at the beginning of a process, “The notion of slow, measured steps is absolutely unacceptable. Yes, it will require some of us to relinquish or share power in ways that may make people who hold power uncomfortable, but that’s a characteristic of structural change. At every turn, we must question the notion of incremental steps. The journey toward justice must be on a fast track” (Reese, June 22, 2020).

Calling on the expert testimony of Derek Bok in the 2003 *Grutter v. Bollinger* U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld use of affirmative action in admissions processes, Jones (2017, 64) invokes a sense of the shift suggested above and enabled through rejecting a deficit model of diversity and aiming for one that emphasizes the positive, transformative opportunities of a genuinely diverse community of scholarship:

A great deal of learning occurs informally. It occurs through interactions among students of both sexes; of different races, religions, and backgrounds; who come from cities and rural areas, from various states and countries; who have a wide variety of interests, talents, and perspectives; and who are able, directly or indirectly, to learn from their differences and to stimulate one another to re-examine even their most deeply held assumptions about themselves and their world.

Such a recognition may further shift our attention to one of “pluralism.” As suggested by William Ashton (2009, 66), who directs an honors program at a public college in New York City, “diversity” may imply “that a dominant power or perspective is allowing or inviting different perspectives to join the

conversation,” whereas “‘pluralism’ implies that no group or perspective dominates; there are so many voices that there is no majority.” For Ashton, a focus on “student diversity” within recruitment and admissions might lead (as it arguably has in many cases) to what he describes as minority “tokens” who may lack confidence in their place within an institution. Importantly, any situation engendered by such a limited focus on diversity is unlikely to provide opportunity to call into question status quo beliefs and practices, to hold people accountable for the ways that they think and do things, unlike a situation where a true plurality exists.

Framing Honors Education

Among other things, the discussion so far should suggest that our attention must be on far more than matters of recruitment and admissions from the bare point of view of numbers. Among them, is the need to question how “honors” is framed; How do we talk about it? How might the language and images that we use preclude engagement in honors by students who may be well-qualified, personally capable, and certainly valuable as community members, but who do not see a “fit” with the project of honors (at least in its current form) and their present sense of their self (Walters, Cooley, and Dunbar 2019; cf. Davis 2018)? Speaking to the experience of the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, Jones (2018, 68) refers to an “undermatching” where some students voluntarily opted-out of participation in honors when they did not *perceive* themselves as qualified. Providing some context to better understand such undermatching, Dziensinski and her coauthors (2017, 92) explain that “For students from majority groups, negotiating [or first perceiving for themselves] an honors identity may not be problematic in itself because honors likely coordinates well with other identities more associated with privilege,” which is a comfortable, privileged association that we would not expect among students from underrepresented groups in higher education or those who identify with socially marginalized groups. As noted by Davis, a significant disconnect between how honors is framed and how potential honors students from such groups (among others) see themselves “signals the need for reconsideration of the language used to describe honors students ... to enhance how this population of students is supported by faculty and staff or recruited by admissions” (2018, 63).

In the literature of honors, analysis of this and related points has entailed much discussion of the fluid nature of student identities and the fact that while students may be asked to “check a box” to describe one or more seemingly essential elements of their identity for institutional purposes, multifaceted identities are not, in fact, as definitive or well aligned as they might appear on a standardized form. As noted by Dziensinski (2017, 99), identity is affected by external forces where “judgment can place them in a box before they get a chance to explain their story of identity navigation and chosen identity. While part of identity navigation involves processing external feedback, personal identities are ideally chosen with an awareness about the range and potential meaning of the identities available ... Students may also make choices about the meaning of their honors identity and how this will intersect with other valued dimensions of self.” To confront a limited and limiting view of identity—and these shortcomings may stand in the way of meaningful change to the status quo in honors education—Dziensinski and her coauthors suggest that we must understand how “diverse groups of students make meaning of honors and how the specific social practices of any particular honors community might shape student experiences, including their own self-perceptions of privilege and social responsibility” (Dziensinski, Camarena, and Homrich-Knieling 2017, 91).

Accessibility and Inclusion: Transfer Students

Acknowledging the need for honors programs to “recruit, retain, and meaningfully engage diverse populations of talented students,” Patrick Bahls (2018, 74) finds that a natural corollary is recognition of a need to ensure accessibility to honors by transfer students. Transfer students are numerous, with National Student Clearinghouse studies cited by Bahls indicating during the 2015-2016 academic year, fully half of the students completing bachelor’s degrees at four-year institutions in the United States had transferred or at least completed one-semester of coursework in the previous 10 years at a two-year institution. In some states, the figure was over 70 percent. Transfer students are not only numerous, they are also most likely

to represent first-generation students, generally, and particularly greater ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic and age diversity than students who complete their four-year degree wholly at one institution—a fact particularly true for those that began their studies at a two-year institution. Even when aware of the possibility of honors at the institution to which they have transferred, undermatching is a significant issue.

The design of many honors curricula are fundamentally unwelcoming to transfer students and, in their rigidity, deny both these students and the program considerable opportunities that may be afforded by their inclusion. Co-curricular requirements such as mandatory service programs and required honors courses that can be designed for generally younger, less experienced students may provide unrealistic expectations or, practically speaking, obstacles for non-traditional, transfer students who may already have considerable “real world” experience (that could obviate a need for “service” or “leadership” commitments) and who certainly need a quicker pace to graduation. For a program like Marshall, required hours that students are expected to earn in completion of lower-level departmental, honors-designated General Education courses essentially preclude participation of transfer students in honors. As noted by (Bahls 2018, 85), in the absence of curricular flexibility “some transfer students may find it difficult to complete honors curricula that are ‘frontloaded,’ with a significant portion of required courses falling in the early years of a student’s college career. On the other hand, an honors curriculum that places too many requirements in the final semesters of a student’s study may find itself in competition with major departmental curricula for transfer students’ time.”

Possible Paths Forward

For the remainder of this report, I will consider possible paths forward toward what I characterized as a *transformative diversity* in honors. Currently, I will resist making any specific recommendations for honors at Marshall University—though I may point out places where the program stands relative to a particular path. For a point of departure, I would like to note that it has always been our understanding in honors at Marshall that the college should serve as a hub, at least, for curricular innovation and an advocate for thoughtful, civic-minded engagement. Further, while economic pressures experienced by under-funded public universities like Marshall have driven us away from pedagogically desirable smaller, more intimate seminar-style classes for most students, honors continues to do its best to hold the line—at least for students within the program. However, as should become clear in the coming pages, honors could do much more.

Jones makes that case, arguing that “honors can have perhaps its greatest impact by serving as a rigorous, persistent, and public *advocate for change* in how inclusive excellence is perceived, enabling honors to model for other campus programs ways of implementing inclusive excellence” (2017, 38; emphasis added). For the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) inclusive excellence is critical to the well-being of democratic culture. The association has established it as a guiding principle in their efforts to help universities integrate inclusive excellence and educational quality efforts into both their missions and institutional operations. For the AAC&U, making excellence inclusive is “... an active process through which colleges and universities achieve excellence in learning, teaching, student development, institutional functioning, and engagement in local and global communities ... [and a process that requires] that we uncover inequities in student success, identify effective educational practices, and build such practices organically for sustained institutional change” (2013; cf. Williams, Berger, and McClendon).

If administrators are to be activists for a richly inclusive, diverse community of scholars committed to inclusive excellence, then honors has come a long way from serving simply as a traditionalist barrier to economically expedient developments in higher education. Inclusive excellence would put honors out front, in the lead. Clearly, honors must not and, indeed cannot, remain on the sidelines in what has become subjects of necessary public debate as well as social and institutional reckoning: “Programs that attempt to remain neutral, insisting that their curriculum and objectives are focused on helping all students achieve their highest academic potentials independent of any social bias or judgment, are missing the

point. To the degree that programs do not actively challenge the social norms of privilege tied to honors, they are *tacitly supporting the status quo* that makes honors a privilege for the privileged” (Dziesinski, Camarena, and Homrich-Knieling 2017, 84–85; emphasis added). The University of Wisconsin provides an effective illustration of the fundamental purposes of inclusive excellence in which we see reflected the attention that I noted earlier to go beyond a simple numeric or deficit-minded approach to diversity focused minimally on admissions to embracing diversity as positively transformative.

Inclusive Excellence is a change-oriented planning process that encourages us to continue in our diversification efforts albeit with a greater intentionality and attentiveness of how they serve the needs of our students. Informed by a well-established body of empirical research as to the institutional contexts, practices, and cultures that contribute to the establishment of a diverse learning environment, Inclusive Excellence represents a shift not in the essence of our work but how we approach it and carry it out. Above all, Inclusive Excellence asks us to actively manage diversity as a *vital and necessary asset of collegiate life rather than as an external problem* (“Inclusive Excellence,” University of Wisconsin System, quoted in Jones 2017, 40; emphasis added).

Strategic Enrollment Management

We have already reviewed some of the issues related to admissions practices along a continuum from skimming’s total reliance on quantitative measures to exhaustive reviews of qualitative data from candidates seen in free-standing approaches. Clearly, honors programs that have embraced the principle of inclusive excellence or emphasized the transformative potential of diversity can be expected to be found at or at least near the free-standing end of the continuum with a broadly holistic take on recruitment and admissions. As a reminder of the central concern among such programs over use of standardized test scores as the definitive factor, consider a recent essay in *Inside Higher Education* by Alicia Reyes-Barriénte, an assistant professor of political science at Texas A&M. She provides a damning indictment of honors programs such as the one at the institution where she earned her undergraduate degree.

I didn’t apply to the university honors program because my SAT score was lower than the required threshold. But ... I was, in fact, an excellent student: I graduated magna cum laude with a double major and a GPA of 3.93 and was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. I was certainly qualified for my university’s honors program, but the institution’s *discriminatory requirements denied me this opportunity* (Reyes-Barriénte in VanZanten 2020, 5; emphasis added).

Any significant shift from admissions procedure based on skimming, as now employed at Marshall, may result in a “torrent of angry phone calls and emails” that would make any administrator “dread going to work,” as Knudson (2011) relates from his experience in the honors program at the University of Florida, but it will also generate enormous appreciation from families with students who are more than worthy but would have been left out of an opportunity to push the boundaries and succeed in honors. At universities such as the University of Florida and Marshall, alignment between a public mandate, stated institutional missions and decisions regarding admissions and selectivity, generally, should mean “special attention to applicants who by virtue of disadvantaged individual or community background tend to be overlooked” (Stoller 2004, 84). As explained by Davis, one way to bring this attention to bear is to broaden the scope of what we consider to be high achievement such that it is not characterized “solely by students’ performance in the classroom or testing; community involvement and demonstration of character are also important factors in determining a student’s ability to achieve. Current methods of selection for honors often leave this piece out of the admissions process, potentially overlooking many qualified candidates” (2018, 65).

Even when we are looking at holistic approaches that wholly or mostly eschew quantitative measures, an inclusive approach entails some reimagining of prevailing qualitative standards to allow for far more sensitive consideration of communal and individual circumstances. Examining the socioeconomic context of her honors program at Loyola University in New Orleans, Louisiana, Naomi Klos describes how 40

percent of adults are illiterate and nearly as many children live in poverty. While not all communities in which we find honors programs have such desperate statistics, many schools, such as Marshall, have considerable numbers of students whose backgrounds reflect significant social, economic, and personal hardship—but also may hold many shining examples of high achievement of different kinds. Klos describes how understanding and considering this reality in the context of a holistic admissions process entails overcoming a systemic bias in traditional metrics of achievement and “excellence” through an inclusive reframing of previous standards that evaluates students as individuals within particular circumstances.

[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 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-envision[s] 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” (Klos 2018, 7–8)

Holistic Admission

Speaking to honors at Minnesota State at Mankato, Walters and his co-authors describe their holistic admission process, which began in 2009 and holds, as suggested by Davis, a broader vision of high achievement and academic potential.

Applicants to honors programs—whether incoming first-year students, current Minnesota State Mankato students, or transfer students—are evaluated with a holistic rubric that takes into account their potential for growth and achievement as well as any previous successes. Qualitative evaluations of achievement—such as student narratives and recommendation forms—carry more weight than numeric data. An important component of our efforts toward inclusivity is accepting current students after their first semester as well as transfer students; we do a round of applications for current students each fall and spring semester (Walters, Cooley, and Dunbar 2019).

The situation at Mankato suggests a comprehensive vision when it comes to the scope of students who remain eligible as they advance toward completion of their degree—from first-year to community college graduate transfers, for example. Most discussions of admission (holistic or otherwise), however, continue to focus on incoming, first-year students. As shared by Jones (2017, 46), in the case of the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, holistic admissions work is essentially a two-step process. The first step is what amounts to a kind of “screening” that defines a pool of potential students and is tied to one of several benchmarks that they use to initiate a second step holistic review of applications. Those benchmarks include an ACT score of 26 or higher, top 10% of high school class, or a 3.75 GPA or better—all of which are together or independently used in many honors programs for automatic “skimming” of incoming students offered admission to honors without a separate application. If an applicant to the university meets one of these criteria, a review by multiple readers from several institutional offices—including honors, admissions, and multicultural affairs—is conducted in which applications are evaluated for evidence of strength in several additional criteria.⁶

VanZanten (2020) describes a similar “one of the following” first step strategy at Valparaiso University in Indiana which includes similar quantitative measures to Eau Claire but also such factors as a student

⁶ As suggested by Stoller (2004, 82), what is being suggested by a more holistic admissions process shares a parallel set of concerns with comprehensive assessment of learning outcomes—through use of student portfolios, for example—that is itself a response an understanding that a transcript (whether high school or college) is “not a sole or sufficient record of incremental degrees of student success.”

being referred by an admissions counselor or alumni, attending an honors recruitment event, or expressing personal interest in honors membership. These additional elements help constitute a measure that they refer to as the “Quest Quotient” intended to capture student interest and possible commitment. So, in this way, Valparaiso’s honors program may be more accessible than Eau Claire whose criteria, while offering three different possible numeric measures of achievement, remains inarguably demanding, and arguably discriminatory, in any one of them.

Importantly, Valparaiso’s honors program acknowledges that their curriculum is founded on small, interdisciplinary seminars centered in the humanities and social sciences and that, accordingly, require extensive reading and intensive writing. Thus, they are careful in their review of student applications for indications in coursework and among various test scores, including AP exams when available, that students will be prepared for this kind of work as they do not want, effectively, to set them up for failure. It should be noted as well that Valparaiso’s university application requires writing samples as well as letters of recommendation. Thus, there is no need to require a separate application in order to obtain these materials for review by the honors program.

For students applying to Valparaiso whose Quest Quotient is high enough to attract attention from the honors program, but for whom there are concerns about preparedness and as a matter of “fit” with their particular curricular demands, promising candidates are invited to complete an additional form with six short writing prompts meant to affirm that they have a “questing spirit.” Here the suggestion by Peter Long and John Falconer (2003) to use what is called the “strivers” model, developed by the Educational Testing Service, seems related in its motivation. The strivers model uses fourteen socioeconomic indicators to provide a means of identifying motivated applicants whose standardized test scores and GPAs are believed to be depressed because of social and economic circumstances. Essentially, an approach such as this aims to find students who “achieve beyond expectations” or, put another way, who accomplish outstanding things despite where they live and how they may have been marginalized based on socially recognized categories of race, for example.

In all of this, it can be difficult to know from what is written or to imagine, in the absence of direct experience with these kinds of processes, how to “draw the line” that decides who is admitted and who is rejected when holistic approaches entail what are, no doubt, subjective, individual forms of assessment and attribution of value among a multitude of different criteria. Stoller suggests that at least some of the answer must be informed by the overall institutional mission and culture. It is, in both cases in his illustration, essentially a question of fit with the program in a larger institutional context. The view that he conveys below might be considered somewhat coolly pragmatic—at least in the first instance. However, it is realistic, no doubt, given how honors program admission results—which is to say the program’s success measured in calculations of structural diversity—will very likely themselves be subject to a bleak numeric (and very likely in its case, economic) calculus. Thus, he suggests that it is essential in evaluating potential students to think about ...

... whether the honors program is considered by the upper administration primarily as a device to bring in a measurably “better sort of student” than the institution usually gets, or whether the program is valued more for what it does (for lack of a better word) programmatically. In the former case, privileging nonacademic qualities would probably not produce the kind of measurable gains in admission credentials that are the program’s lease on life; in the latter case, getting students who “fit the program” is paramount, and depending on the program, particular nonacademic qualities might have particular value (2004, 83–84).

In the second instance to which Stoller speaks, program fit is sought through holistic admissions procedures in which some applicants, with otherwise competitive academic credentials, fail the test while some applicants with numbers that are “less than stellar,” but still more than the average at Penn State, do very well. Importantly, Stoller notes that a holistic admission process requires both the student and program to be clear with each other and with themselves about what is important to them. The

individualized and, frankly, more demanding process compared to skimming will no doubt lead to some students simply finding the task of applying too onerous, but acknowledgement that “it isn’t worth it” or even that “it’s just not for me” can be a good outcome for all concerned if these determinations are suggestive of a lack of fit and a potential obstacle to student success. Of course, in those cases, it likely isn’t possible to find out what may have been at issue.

The question here of fit certainly harkens back to the earlier discussion of “matching,” or specifically “undermatching,” where students who are, in fact, qualified and capable of joining honors simply do not see themselves as being in honors. In the context of admissions and, specifically, of how applications might be put together—not only in terms of what is looked at from students but also how students see themselves—we can consider how the program at Mankato addressed a problem of perception. They did so as a means of increasing access and diversity by revising application questions.

[I]nstead of asking students to list or describe leadership positions they held, our question pertaining to leadership now reads: “Identify the most meaningful school or community activity in which you have participated. How did your participation in the activity impact others in your school or community?” In other words, we now acknowledge in our application the mantra that we constantly assert to our students: leadership is about opportunities and results, not positions. This question also allows our students to engage in deeper thinking about their experiences by asking them about the effects their actions had on other individuals, not just on themselves (Walters, Cooley, and Dunbar 2019).

Another consideration is how degree of fit might shape student retention and completion in honors. On this point, Jones describes how in the four years prior to his report “students admitted to honors through a holistic process (based on a diversity-aware review of multiple measures of academic performance) have *performed similarly to students admitted through automatic admission* based solely on ACT score/class rank, with holistic admissions having the additional benefit of diversifying the potential pool of students who can benefit from high impact experiences in honors” (2017, 46; emphasis added). It would be important to carefully track outcomes and to adjust, as necessary, procedures suggested by results in retention and rates of graduation.

First-Year Achievement

As suggested earlier, beyond incoming, first-year students, some honors programs allow and even seek to admit current, first-year students. Joy Pehlke describes how a first-year achievement method allows for students to enter honors even if their high school academic record did not permit them initially.

Many students have shown that they do not reach their full academic potential until *after* they enter college. Expectations are often woven into the picture, and students who were not expected to succeed in high school begin to push themselves beyond their own and others’ expectations in college ... This multi-tiered method of honors admissions has allowed for increased representation and a diversity of life experiences in the honors student body (2003, 30; emphasis added).

Pehlke clarifies that some programs (and perhaps generally those who rely on a skimming model for incoming, first-year admission) rely exclusively on first-year GPA, but some other programs allow, for example, evaluation of individual faculty recommendations and interviews with students themselves. Longo and Falconer (2003, 58–59) consider such programs one of an array of mechanisms for enhancing diversity and akin to the “walk-on” program famously employed by the University of Nebraska football coach Tom Osborne. With an honors program, students who establish a first-year record of academic and other forms of achievement can apply for admission. Again, this sort of approach opens the door for students who (for reasons already described) may not have done well enough with traditional indicators of success to demonstrate their ability *before* coming to college. Importantly, it also provides an opportunity for honors programs to partner with institutional “first-year success” programs that they note are

increasingly common in higher education as revenue-strapped schools worry not only about recruitment but also retention.

Speaking to their experience in honors at Central Michigan University, Dziesinski and her co-authors discuss how their program developed a second “track” for admission that “gives priority to students with high academic goals who are overcoming challenges to achievement once on campus. Referrals from both our faculty and our multicultural program office are useful tools for identifying students from diverse backgrounds who would specifically benefit from extra support and increased academic challenge” (2017, 86–87). They further describe how admission to honors through this additional, first-year track has increased student participation from underrepresented groups on campus, including students of color, first-generation college students, and international students.

Transfer Students

Earlier, I explained how considering the situation of transfer students is an essential part of addressing inclusive excellence. As suggested by Bahls, to the extent an honors program is holistic in its admission procedures for incoming or current first-year students, and for likely the same reason, treatment of potential transfer student applicants should avoid using

measures that may not only re-inscribe historical inequities but also may no longer be valid indicators of transfer students’ current readiness for honors. After all, many transfer students come to honors a few years after having taken the SAT or ACT, making these already-suspect indicators of academic excellence even less valid measures. In contrast, asking transfer students to describe, in writing or an interview, their experience with learning outside the classroom, study abroad, community engagement, or other life experiences enables those screening honors applications to gain a much clearer view of the applicant (2018, 89).

Bahls suggests that in order to fully address concerns as may be related to transfer students in the context of diversity, inclusion and equity, honors program need to consider not only questions of admissions, but also (as suggested previously) the design of the honors curriculum and, in particular, its “balance” over a student’s career, requirements for remaining in good standing and graduating, agreements with other colleges and universities regarding transfers of credit, and website design and language. Further, honors programs concerned about equity, and open to opportunities presented by an abundant diversity of experience that transfer students can bring, will need to provide flexibility in their curricula while continuing to provide worthy challenges. As noted by Bahls

Some curricular structures can give flexibility to all students, including transfer students, without sacrificing the richness of the honors experience. Granting waivers to honors “latecomers,” including both continuing students and transfer students, respects these students’ academic efforts *prior* to joining the honors community. Such waivers are reasonable for courses like first-year seminars or first-year writing, which students are likely to take in their first one or two semesters regardless of their membership in an honors program. Moreover, honors contracts, reading courses or independent study in honors, and honors credit for high-impact practices like study abroad and internships grant students autonomy in crafting a sustainable honors schedule (2018, 86; emphasis added).

Given practical limitations presented by what might be a highly compressed timeframe for transfers to complete both honors and major requirements, programs such as that of the University of North Carolina at Asheville offer at least two distinct tiered options for graduation with honors from the university that are based on completion of different amounts of honors credit. Specifically, UNC Asheville has two categories of graduate from the program: Either “with Distinction as a University Scholar” after completing at least 21 of specified honors credits or “with Recognition as an Honors Scholar” with at least 12 hours of specified honors credits.

Recruitment

Speaking of his recent experience as a self-described Black honors student at West Virginia University, Stephen Scott encourages honors programs not only to pursue a more holistic and inclusive admissions process but also to be more thoughtful about recruitment. Specifically, Scott (2017, 128) suggests that programs could participate in or host recruitment events in urban areas, conduct outreach to National Merit Scholarship recipients, Gates Millennium Scholars, or recipients of other national undergraduate scholarships, and directly invite both incoming and current Black students to join honors. Illustrating a robust attempt to broaden and diversify recruitment through their outreach to schools near the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), Stacey and Kelber-Kaye (2018) describe a growing mentoring partnership between honors and an anchor high school in Baltimore City, in particular, which is the nearest urban area to the university.

I find Stacey and Kelber-Kaye's perspective on their efforts an important and powerful one that helps remind us of earlier points about perception as well as the need to establish relationships of mutual trust and respect.

Increasing diversity happens one student at a time. Sometimes an organization or institution can rely on its reputation and stated mission to attract diverse students. [The Honors College at the University of Maryland Baltimore County] on the other hand, has to sell itself energetically to diverse students, one at a time. We hope at some point to achieve critical-mass, a happy situation in which we can rely on the twinned fact and perception of our diversity to perpetuate and solidify our inclusive excellence. But for us, for now, increasing diversity is a person-by-person effort, and this is probably true for most Honors Colleges (2018, 15–16).

A personalized perspective of earning a relationship with each student through meaningful contact that helps to broaden and deepen mutual understanding is further indicated by the University of Maryland's approach to recruiting admitted students who have not accepted an offer to join honors. While ensuring that they were including what they describe as under-represented minorities, they work with current honors students to hand write notes that capture elements of their own experience as students in honors to send to these undecided students as they weigh the offer. Their outreach went beyond students offered admission to honors to include high-performing, under-represented minorities who had not pursued membership in honors.

As they describe, this entailed "reading their UMBC application essays and materials, and then using Honors College stationery to hand write notes to them, mentioning aspects of their history, trajectory or aspirations that suggested they would find the Honors College a congenial and rewarding place, and inviting them to call, e-mail or visit" (Stacey and Kelber-Kaye 2018, 10). Scott explains that any such outreach ...

... needs to feel personal and cannot consist only of an email that does not address the student by name or that is identical to another student's email. Black honors students are especially aware of wide-net outreach and inclined to ignore an invitation that is not authentic because, like other Black students, they are often included on email lists purely on the basis of their race. Personal outreach needs to be accompanied by Black representation in scholarship presentations or events, which should feature previous Black finalists and winners and Black faculty members who have mentored them or whose work can be useful to scholarship applications (2017, 128).

Longo and Falconer (2003) also point to the opportunity for outreach in academic summer camps, many of which may be right on campus. These student experiences can provide indicators other than standardized test scores, GPAs, and class ranks. They suggest that, as has been done at Marshall with the Governor's Honors Academy, honors programs can assist in delivery of camps and be given the opportunity to directly work with and observe students as well as solicit feedback from camp faculty. However, they also advise that in order for this effort to have any hope of reaching underrepresented

minorities, the camps themselves must be committed in their efforts to recruit, admit and, potentially, support the participation of students from such groups in the first place.

While not simply something that might shape the outcome of recruitment efforts, *representation* is a significant factor contributing to perception and the degree to which a potential student may or may not see a “fit” with themselves and honors. In the qualitative study of the low involvement and experience of African American students in honors at Western Kentucky University, Sarah Rigsby and her co-authors provide a sense of what may matter to such students when it comes to representation and perception.

When asking the students ... about what the Honors College could do to increase support from the African American or other minority students, many participants mentioned being more inclusive with print publications. One participant said, “Advertise for us more, nothing special but just show us that people of our ethnicity or race are accepted.” This lack of representation in print materials proved to be significant in the study because when assessing the materials most utilized by the Honors College Admissions Team, minorities are almost overrepresented compared to their existence within the Honors College. However, when looking through the Honors College blog photos of different events, most of them depict White students. Additionally, those students who utilize the Honors College Facebook and Twitter pages tend to be Caucasian. Since those are the media outlets that incoming and current students will most likely reference in determining what their experience will be like in the Honors College, it is not surprising that the participants would request more minority representation (Rigsby, Destiny Savage, and Jorge Wellmann 2012).

Scott (2017) suggests engaging current Black students in, for example, an “honors ambassador program” that would serve not only to help promote honors in recruitment efforts but also to foster and support Black students already in the program. VanZanten also encourages honors programs to make sure that their online presence is one that highlights genuine diversity and the success of students of diverse backgrounds. She also asserts that students of color, as she characterizes them, “should be invited to serve as hosts, tour guides, and panelists for campus visit days, so potential students can see a diverse community at work” (2020, 13). The study by Rigsby (et al., 2012) reaches the same conclusion that recruitment and outreach efforts, generally, must illustrate a commitment to diversity which serves not only in those efforts but also provides supportive opportunities for engagement among current students of diverse backgrounds. Walters and her co-authors provide an illustration of their efforts on this front at the University of Minnesota at Mankato through an advisory, support, and advocacy group that they refer to as Equity Ambassadors that consists of students of color.

The honors program empowered the group to make bold programmatic recommendations targeting changes that could make the program a more inclusive, safe, and relevant learning environment for all students. As with any group, the efforts of this one involved a lot of trial and error. Some of the students’ ideas were successful and became integral, for instance, to rewriting our application questions. Some of the students’ ideas and efforts flopped—like the conversation circle coordinated for honors students of color that no one attended (Walters, Cooley, and Dunbar 2019, 60).

Finally, two additional points on the topic of representation. First, Bahls (2018) provides a compelling quasi-linguistic as well as visual analysis of language use and web design as a means to consider how, again, matters of “framing” for honors can lead to undermatching. So, this too is a question of how, in this case, the honors program represents itself to others and, in doing so, may unwittingly convey messages that tend to exclude rather than include potential students—particularly those that may lack what he describes as “academic cultural capital” (2018, 77). Second, it is important to speak clearly and convincingly to what will almost certainly be resistance to change in existing procedures of recruitment, admissions, and retention. Specifically, Jones states that those in honors administration who pursue change of the sort described in this document

must be willing to confront deficit-minded assumptions about diversity in higher education that are expressed not only by the broader public but also by faculty and administrators ... [and that hold] that undergraduate students of color are at fault for being underprepared for rigorous educational experiences, a perception that also stigmatizes other diverse student communities such as non-traditional students, English language learners, and students participating in programs designed to expand college access. Such perceptions become a first line of resistance to equity-minded change in educational practices ... (2017, 57).

Retention

While it may be understandable, though unadvisable (and certainly if a simple numeric diversity is the goal) that recruitment and admissions be an all absorbing focus, work is not over when incoming classes are made more diverse. As pointed out by Stacey and Kelber-Kaye (2018), it is arguably more important to plan to support the members of these newly diversified classes *all the way through their graduation*. VanZanten puts it clearly:

Pursuing higher numbers of diverse bodies is not enough; we must also work to cultivate a sense of inclusion and value for our students from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. Inadequate academic preparation, lack of support networks, alienating pedagogies, few role models in faculty and peers, the loneliness of being one of only a few, and a traditional classical curriculum are all factors that can discourage a sense of inclusion. Too often the handful of students of color in a program may face suspicion and isolation (2020, 11).

This continues the earlier point regarding the necessarily personalized attention and work given to building relationships as an essential element of any of these efforts. Dzieszinski (2017, 88) and her co-authors refer to how the staff at their honors program try to develop personal relationships with all of their students but that this work is even more intentional with students from underrepresented groups “including students of color, first-generation college students, international students, students with disabilities, and others who have been identified as being at greater educational risk.” They have developed targeted advising outreach where they identify and assign honors college staff as mentors to provide tracking and support. Walters and his co-authors similarly assert that recruitment and admissions is only the beginning of a relationship where the goal is to make admitted students happy and fully participating members of the program.

Building successful student relationships is key to that goal but is challenging in an era of budget cuts. One budget-friendly way to increase student access to high-impact teaching and mentoring practices is through campus partnerships, which can make a little investment go a long way. Honors programs can, for example, partner with groups including a greater diversity of students to co-host campus events ... (Walters, Cooley, and Dunbar 2019; cf. Scott 2017 on ideas for such partnerships).

The point here about cultivating partnerships is an important one. Such partnering should not be simply a matter of efficiency and cost savings, rather it is essential element of relationship building and one that can provide additional opportunities for support and inclusive forms of community for students. For an honors program seeking to address diversity and social justice issues, such efforts could be greatly facilitated by fostering partnerships with academic and student affairs programs that share these goals (cf. Dzieszinski, Camarena, and Homrich-Knieling 2017).

Fostering partnerships intersects with an interest in authentic honors “programming,” i.e., the preparation of co-curricular social and academic events, which could be enriched and made more meaningful through collaboration with other units on campus. A vision for such programming should be a natural extension of a program’s mission statement and associated learning outcomes. This is a matter of operationalizing core values concerning self-reflection, critical inquiry, and social justice that are likely already (or should be) at the center of such statements and outcomes (cf. Dzieszinski, Camarena, and Homrich-Knieling 2017).

As described by Scott, honors programs universally pride themselves on the intellectual curiosity of their students and on their efforts in fostering it through facilitating a supportive environment where a diverse community of students and faculty can learn from each other's experience. However, he finds that honors programs may not always meet the challenge of providing difficult topical programming that invites critical examination of salient local and national issues. According to Scott, our programming should be

unapologetic in educating students about current events related to race. Do not be afraid to host an event about Black Lives Matter or to encourage a student to do so. Do not be afraid to facilitate a dialogue on Rachel Dolezal and transracial identity. Do not be afraid to create a networking event specifically for Black honors students and Black alumni. Do not be afraid to let your students be Black, to express their Blackness, and to educate others about the spectrum of Blackness. Within a predominantly White space, Black students need at least a corner of the room to call their own or to encourage them to redesign the entire space so that Blackness is not sectioned off (2017, 128–29).

Pedagogy and Curricular Development

While attention to “content” (as we’ve seen above related to questions of co-curricular programming) is an appropriate area of concern and means of potentially addressing inclusive excellence through engagement with those subjects in coursework, the broader question of pedagogy, i.e., how any such content is *delivered*, warrants special focus. As already suggested, honors in higher education within the United States has generally relied on pedagogical practices that would today fall under the rubric of “high-impact practices” (HIP). The more intimate, engaged mentoring approach within seminar-style classes with much lower student-faculty ratios are methods widely recognized as valuable. However, it is now recognized as especially beneficial to underrepresented students. Speaking to the high-impact practices as outlined in the aforementioned “Basic Characteristics” provided by the NCHC for “fully developed” honors programs, Klos describes how these 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” (Klos, 6).

Located in a university ranked as the nation’s most diverse for 18 years by U.S. News & World Report, the experience of the extraordinary honors program of Rutgers University at Newark is especially insightful. As described by David Kirp (May 22, 2018) in his *New York Times* reporting on the program, honors at Newark has remarkable student demographics compared with other honors programs: Forty percent are community college graduates; forty percent are first in family college students; and seventy-five percent are eligible for Pell Grants. Their average high-school grades and SAT scores are actually lower than the campus average. Students in honors at Rutgers-Newark, who would likely be characterized initially as “at risk” most anywhere, benefit from high-impact pedagogical practices that encourage a sense of belonging to a nurturing community through forging personal connections with each other, the faculty, and with the staff of the program.

While academic skill matters to the Rutgers program, selection is based on an emphasis on student resiliency, a drive to learn, indication of what some refer to a “growth mindset” (a willingness to work through problems and learn rather than give up) and a passion for addressing social justice issues head on. At Rutgers-Newark, not only is admissions fundamentally different than what is found at most other honors programs (and the resulting student demographics), they spend a great deal of resources supporting and encouraging their students through building relationships as well as through the unifying and engaging focus of their curriculum and co-curricular programming on social justice issues. In the socioeconomic context within which Rutgers-Newark is found, and with its particular honors student body, this has worked very well. The curriculum is a cornerstone that necessitates a high degree of fit between the program and its students.

While not every honors program will be ready, willing, or even able to implement such a singularly focused curricular approach, they can certainly look critically at their own curriculum with an eye to the sorts of skills students are believed to be obtaining. Speaking to his experience at the University of Florida, Knudson notes that (as is increasingly true at Marshall), incoming honors students have already completed a great deal of the general education requirements through advanced placement (AP) courses. Knudson laments the fact that students in numerous majors who skip these general education courses likely miss an opportunity to work on improving their writing and acquiring a more sophisticated understanding of material learned only at a high school level. In order to address this concern, the honors program at Florida has developed a new course built on addressing the issue of social justice that will be offered to *all* of its first-year students with the goal to give them “a common intellectual experience that helps them hone their critical-thinking and writing skills” (2011).

Beyond simple concern for what honors students may be missing, many in honors have come to understand that given its privileged position, honor programs have a special responsibility to be agents for change and advocate for social justice on their campuses. Honors programs typically have a great deal of discretion to shape their curricula. Again, working from progressive mission statements and learning outcomes, these curricula can serve honors in that effort while also helping the broader communities of which they are a part. Speaking to the need to turn attention to what, specifically, is being taught in honors, Jones speaks to what could be an obstacle when he asserts that

honors leaders must challenge assumptions that topics of multiculturalism, equity, and diversity lack rigor as academic discourses, which means, therefore, a limited role for these topics is acceptable within high-value programs. Challenging these assumptions successfully *will require review and revision of mission statements and programmatic practice to centralize the goal of inclusive excellence in honors*. This process will be difficult, and it may require an infusion of expertise from on- and off-campus practitioners in the area of student diversity to institute equity-minded change in honors (2017, 60; emphasis added).

To be sure, I want to convey the point that the curriculum should not be thought as a curated collection of subject matter, regardless of topic. Rather, it is the means to create a particular kind of community—an *intentional* community as I earlier named it—amongst students as well as an extension and operationalization of a stated mission and path to fulfillment of expected learning outcomes. Dziesinski and her co-authors speak well to how promoting themes such as pluralism, multiculturalism, equity, diversity, and social justice are important to the work of honors in at least two ways:

First, it ensures that all students coming to the honors community will develop new tools to understand their identities and place in society. This understanding prepares honors students to be advocates for social change and allies for their peers from more marginalized backgrounds. Second, students from underrepresented and marginalized groups would see honors as a welcoming community for them—a place where the intersection of honors privilege and other identities can be navigated in positive ways. Programs that explicitly address privilege and power challenge hegemonic notions of society and the honors students’ positions within it; these programs recognize that students are not “climbing the social ladder” apolitically but are instead embedded in broader dynamics of inequality, oppression, and privilege (2017, 84).

An important caveat is that honors administrators cannot (and should not) expect students to acquire such skills as intercultural competence or come to value civic engagement through limited, one-off “service” requirements, for example. Indeed, even while declining to require that students participate in them, schools such as Marshall have moved away from even describing these experiences simply as “service.” In recognition of how efforts might previously have been both highly limited and potentially more beneficial to the institution as an practical means to a curricular end than to some community partners involved, such experiences are now reimagined as “community-based learning,” which suggests a greater commitment to building-up meaningful collaborative partnerships through longer-term, experiential, and

grounded understandings of what different people in the community need. I believe the interest here is for achieving a more immersive experiential learning that is mutually beneficial and even transformative.

Speaking to their experience at Loyola, Klos explains that if social justice is important to a program (as it must be the broader society), then justice education must be “scaffolded into the curriculum as a whole ... 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 (2018, 5). Among suggestions from Klos and others for this more comprehensive, even immersive, approach to how their students follow their curriculum, are opportunities for community-based, inter-cultural learning whether in domestic or international, study-abroad contexts. An essential point is that what can be called 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 [limited] encounters to community-engaged research” (ibid).

Here we are returned again to the notion that honors education is *uniquely positioned* to offer an example to the entire institution—specifically here of the potential for transformative education built on and through an inclusive and equitable diversity that is truly sensitive to the array of cultural and other identities. In this Pehlke (2003, 32) maintains, “honors administrators must create a level of expectation and accountability among their faculty members that honors holds a unique responsibility to live out the privilege of being deemed honorable ... Being held accountable for how honors affects the undergraduate culture as a whole is a challenge that administrators should accept with enthusiastic anticipation.” This brings me to my final area of inquiry, which is where honors is “located,” both physically and symbolically within a broader institution.

The Institutional Position and “Place” of Honors

Jones rightfully claims that “Because honors is broadly understood as a high-value program where curricular innovation is welcome, honors programs are uniquely positioned to assist institutions in the strengthening of diversity-related outcomes. If inclusive excellence is sought and attained in honors, the broader campus is more likely to conclude that inclusion and excellence can be simultaneously and successfully attained in other programs” (Jones 2017, 41). Clearly, the point that honors has an organizational position that simultaneously enables and mandates that it play such a role is important and one that should be well understood at this point in the discussion. Interestingly, commentators such as Nancy West, speaking from her experience in the honors college at the University of Missouri, draws our attention to the *physical* space associated with honors. As described by West,

The physical space it occupies can ... establish the social difference of an honors college from other colleges on campus. It can suggest that an honors college offers its students more resources, support, and attention than other students receive on campus, which is an age-old promise of honors. But this promise may not be one we want to keep making. Perhaps it is time to rethink that promise by locating our colleges *within spaces that assert the collaboration of honors with other colleges/units* on campus rather than its separation from them (2017, 202; emphasis added).

Basically, we should not take for granted how honors represents itself *spatially* and how its spaces may inform the social identity of those who use it. Thus, if we are concerned with questions of diversity, inclusion and equity, what sort of physical space might embody the qualities that we hope to see in the community of people who are engaged with honors such as a spirit of innovation, creativity, and

openness?⁷ By virtue of the selectivity of admission and exclusive (or even exclusionary) offers that extend to honors students but not other students, among other potential contributing factors, the physical spaces of honors programs can be intentionally insular, isolated and unaccommodating. Here, referring to the work of cultural geographer Doreen Massey, West suggests that we may need to reorient honors away from what may be a traditionally introverted sense of space and place, which is “inward-looking, static, and bounded,” perhaps born of its own marketing as being a place apart from the larger university that is self-contained and protected, to one that is progressively “outward-looking, dynamic, and open” (2017, 204).

Picking up on these ideas, it seems to me that honors stands, and should embrace its position fully, as an *intersectional space*, which is to say the space where differences intersect that is a sort of liminal place between others more sharply defined within and limited by their disciplinary homes, for example. Liminality allows for unbounded creativity, freed from rigid expectation. While honors programs such as at Marshall routinely acknowledge the value attributed to interdisciplinarity, this is mostly restricted to the realm of ideas. Seldom promoted is honors’ status as a *physical* crossroads and common ground for people to gather and share ideas. On this possibility, honors well positioned and all the more so if within a larger context of institutional efforts to become more diverse and inclusive.

West suggests that universities lack “third places.” Universities most typically organize physical spaces of campus to serve discrete populations and their activities. Borrowing the concept of “third place” from Ray Oldenburg, a sociologist, we are presented with the opportunity to think of honors as a sort of *neutral ground* where people of diverse backgrounds can equitably gather and interact. The designation of such a space as “third” comes from its presumed distinction from “first” places, i.e., the domestic sphere or home, and “second” places, which is the more public, but still closed, workplace. As Oldenburg saw them, these third places—such as lively main streets and corner cafes—as providing a vital foundation to a functioning democracy by through supplying a space for people to converse and create habits of public association. Their absence is a serious threat to social well-being in the broader society as it is to the university.

Among advantages of re-imagining honors as a third place is the opportunity to meaningfully reinforce the fact that honors programs house important, interdisciplinary curricula “given that their job is to bring faculty and students from different disciplines together. Like all third places, honors colleges are de facto neutral ground, separate from departments and yet in the business of serving them all; as such, they provide an ideal space for the kind of in between collaboration required by interdisciplinary work. Honors colleges are where team-teaching—that activity we all say we should do more of but cannot because of departmental restrictions—really can happen” (West 2017, 210). Finally, perhaps the greatest benefit to repositioning honors colleges as third places, asserts West, is that it could divorce them from their exclusionary, elitist associations and deliver us at the doorstep of a transformative diversity.

The best third places are *social levelers*. They welcome anyone who has the creativity, curiosity, and sense of adventure to be there. And while thinking of honors colleges as levelers seems radically counterintuitive, doing so will allow us to put much more emphasis on a person’s

⁷ When I came to the Honors College at Marshall as a contributing faculty member in 2011, the college—having inherited its décor from a nearly three-hundred-thousand-dollar interior decorating scheme devised in the 1980s to provide a distinctive home for the Society of Yeager Scholars—conveyed an unmistakable message of old-fashioned exclusivity and upper-class white privilege. I believe the intent was to invoke a sense of the historical origins of honors referred to earlier in this document, i.e., the rarefied air or “majesty” of places like the University of Oxford in England. Heavy, ornate furniture, brass accent pieces including what appear to me as funeral urns, juxtaposed with numerous porcelains in curio cabinets that could be described as Orientalist kitsch, walls festooned with scenes of English fox hunting and maps of colonial-era French government administrative districts. How were students, of any background, meant to experience these spaces? If choices about the space, made at staggering expense, were meant to inform as they must have been, then what lessons were intended by those who designed and paid for them?

intellectual curiosity than his or her resumé or transcript. As third places, honors colleges can openly welcome as part of their community students who do not have a perfect 4.0 GPA. The key to coming into an honors college would, instead, be a ... [liberality] of interest and a fierce desire for breadth of knowledge (ibid.; emphasis added).

Concluding Remarks

As I noted earlier, this is the work of an individual with his own positionality. I have done my best in a to develop the subject to a point where a group of stakeholders can share a common language built from the literature reviewed here and consider a range of possible courses of action highlighted within. Recognize, however, that the illustrations of possible “best practices” going forward are necessarily limited in detail. The sources from which they were drawn were more suggestive than exhaustive. I believe the point for those authors, as it has been for me, was to give people things to think about—a starting point for looking closely at particulars of the institutional context into which any change may be introduced. For me, it is important to know what’s at issue before one gets mired in the technical aspects of procedure.

Here in the Honors College at Marshall University, we’ve been largely content to define our diversity in terms of the broad (but still far from completely representative) inclusion of ideas drawn from a multitude of disciplines and taught by an array of faculty who volunteer to teach for us. Here, we can justly celebrate a real diversity. Perhaps not complete, but rich and rewarding. With students from every undergraduate college and very nearly every undergraduate major and academic discipline represented in our college, we can again claim a kind of academic or disciplinary diversity that is, manifestly, valuable.

Now we must advocate for and cultivate diversity in forms discussed in this document. This will likely start with a minimalistic, somewhat deficit minded approach to a structural diversity in the context of admissions, but it must become much more than that if we want to support diverse students and collectively enjoy a *transformative* diversity. It will require a fundamental rethinking of many things that we currently do, and it will, as should be clear, be built out of authentic, mutually respectful relationships—partnerships—of many kinds. Importantly, we mustn’t get lost in a concern for diversity alone without a diligent effort to create an intentional community akin to the third place described here. This speaks to the need to carefully consider all that I presented here that goes well beyond admissions. Diversity without inclusive equity isn’t likely to be community at all. This entails not just such principles as having an equal voice and a meaningful role as a member, it is also a recognition that we are all accountable—administration, staff, faculty, and students—for building a community that allows everyone to reach their full potential.

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