

# Honors Education and Global Citizenship

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## INTRODUCTION

An issue of *JNCHC* devoted to “Honors Around the Globe” is an important opportunity to consider the role of honors in creating international awareness and understanding. Honors faculty and administrators have become increasingly active in global cross-communication through, for instance, international involvement in the NCHC and the recent conference on “Evoking Excellence in Higher Education and Beyond” in the Netherlands that attracted participants from numerous countries. As we become more familiar with honors in all its manifestation across the globe, now is a good time to consider the value we provide in preparing students to contribute to our changing world.

As honors administrators and faculty, we know that we must educate our students so that they can discover answers to as yet unknown questions and challenges. We must enable them to find solutions using techniques we can now only dream about. Such techniques will allow the frontiers of human possibility to extend dramatically. Change itself has become systemic. The challenge is to educate in order to shape a sustainable future for all. We have created conflicts and problems that we now need to solve. We need to educate in a way that inspires creative citizenship among people who are humble enough to recognize the powerful potential of collaboration, confident enough to confront tomorrow’s problems, proud enough to sparkle with compassion, and ardent enough to make a better world.

Honors programs, which function as laboratories for innovation in regular education, offer educational opportunities for talented, motivated students; we thus have a special responsibility to inspire these students to respect other disciplines, cultures, and nationalities through genuine conversations, interactive learning, and international exchange. Our aim must be to enhance, not compromise, human difference and dignity.

## COLLECTIVE CONVERSATION

We should invest in educating critical and creative young people who want to make a difference in society and science. We need graduates with an open view of society, who know intrinsically that we need each other because everyone brings something special to the table. So, in our courses, one of the important questions should be: what makes a life well-lived? The answers have everything to do with moral principles and values that give continuity and dignity to life, linking happiness to education.

The key is to learn, experience, and understand that there are multitudes of different answers and that the differences make life worthwhile and beautiful. The crux of global citizenship is to respect and even enhance these differences, a process that cannot happen without conversation. Genuine conversation is a form of respect for values even though, and perhaps especially when, values differ among the participants. Conversation is the heartbeat of democracy; it is a disciplined act of communicating, making personal views intelligible to someone who does not share them and also listening to the inner world of someone whose views are different. Through conversation, we can create a collective future.

## INTERACTIVE LEARNING

In the future, honors students will distinguish themselves from their peers and competitors not by the information they know but by how well they convert that knowledge to wisdom, slowly and deeply internalizing it, and by their acts and behavior. We should coach students in this learning process. We should provide conditions such that students, as described by Vygotsky, can be assisted in pushing the boundaries of their development. Teachers and students need time to interact. The personal working relationships between students and teachers are pivotal. Teachers and students working together on independent studies create an effective learning environment.

Personal involvement is one of the most important elements of honors pedagogy. Such involvement includes participation in, for instance, NCHC-designed experiential programs such as City as Text™; seminars in which students reflect on international exchanges; the service-learning programs that have become a standard part of curricula in U.S. honors education; and programs like the Shriver Center of the University of Maryland Baltimore County, where faculty connect their research and teaching to relevant social needs and students link academic study to professional practice as well as service to the community. Through interactive projects, students learn to transform the world.

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## **CROSS-CULTURAL SETTINGS**

Combining analytical and critical thinking with an interdisciplinary and reflective attitude requires a major effort, but this effort is crucial if we aspire to peace because it lets us escape from our prison of self-righteousness. This effort can lead us toward engaging in debate without hoping that the other side loses; it can lead us toward embracing rather than simply tolerating difference. Differences enlarge the sphere of human possibilities, and learning experiences such as studying abroad expand students' ability to compare and reflect on different ideas, values, and points of view.

The rise of social media such as Facebook and Twitter has led to a generation whose world-view is bounded and, one might say, "narrow-cast." We can use such websites to target those who agree with us and thus screen out the voices of the dissident, which is all the more reason that we should teach students to seek out perspectives unlike their own and to collaborate in cross-cultural, interdisciplinary settings—whether within or between national boundaries. If we want to educate global citizens who can make a difference in science and society, we have to invest in new, forward-thinking learning environments and teaching strategies. Living and learning abroad is one such strategy.

Just as the natural environment depends on biodiversity, so the human environment depends on cultural diversity. No single civilization encompasses all the spiritual, ethical, and artistic expressions of mankind. Each culture has something to contribute to the totality of human wisdom. A Jewish sage said, "Who is wise? One who learns from all men." An African proverb says, "Are you in a hurry? Travel alone. Do you want to reach far? Travel together." Study abroad enables students to experience an interconnected world and to embrace difference rather than being threatened by it; it shows them the collective heritage of mankind. Higher education benefits enormously from international exchanges, international honors classes, and study abroad (Paige et al.). As careers increasingly require employees to travel, students need to be preparing for cross-cultural interactions for their professional as well as educational, social, and moral development.

## **GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP AND HONORS PROGRAMS**

Investment in education is the most important way society offers the world a future, yet this investment is still far too unevenly distributed. In 2000, Unesco reported that, out of the current population of the world's children, 113 million did not go to school, and in 2009 it reported that fewer than 40% of countries provide girls and boys equal access to education (UNESCO Institute; UNESCO). Relatively rich countries, such as the United States or

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those in Europe like the Netherlands, should recognize the severity of this deficit in education and the harm it is doing to them as well as to other countries and to the world. Time is of the essence; without major intervention from governments and institutions, large numbers of people will continue to be left behind.

Honors education has an important role to play within this landscape. It needs to generate an environment that allows unfettered thinking and inspires excitement in new possibilities. Honors faculty should teach students that imagining the unimaginable matters as a plan of action as well as education. While transferring knowledge is one of the core responsibilities of universities, society is beyond the point where students can be seen as consumers. Students are participants in, and co-responsible for, their education.

To the extent that colleges and universities are committed to the well-being of society, they must become increasingly proactive in helping more young people attend college, and the same is true for honors programs. We need to recognize the elephant in the room: how do we ensure that the college admissions process is not a revolving door that spins out people of color or people from impoverished backgrounds?

The key question is what resources are required to ensure that intervention programs are effective, given the academic needs and strengths of individual students. In recognizing individual differences, we are contributing to democracy. One of the purposes of democracy is to provide individuals with the opportunities that are best for them. In recognizing individual differences we are paying the truest homage to the worth of all individuals, and part of this homage is recognizing the need for specially designed education for students willing and able to do more than a regular program can offer them. We need to provide education that rewards these students with all the resources and attention they need to succeed.

At the same time, we need to understand that students who participate in special opportunities like honors programs have a special obligation to recognize and appreciate others who are different from them, particularly those who have fewer opportunities. If we provide an education rich in conversation, interactive and reflective learning, and cross-cultural exchanges, then we both enable and encourage these students to honor people who are different from them, to enhance the dignity of all human beings, and to become responsible citizens of the world.

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