Honors Education and the Foundation of Fairness

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A Question of Equity

Edited by

Graeme Harper

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For the students

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FOREWORD

ON EQUITY

SANDRA PÉREZ

As the second decade of the 21st century comes to a close, research, publications, and conversations around issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity are not new to college campuses, neither are the benefits of honors education for intellectually curious and academically committed students, faculty and staff. Yet bringing those two traditionally disparate topics, spaces, or communities into dialogue is newer, a more recent phenomenon. Those of us currently involved in honors education, accepting that despite a concerted effort to widen its understanding across the United States in different institutions of higher learning, honors continues to be a place of privilege for the experiences it offers its students at no additional cost to them. Benefits include smaller class sizes, interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches to learning, greater access to committed faculty, student-led exploration of disciplines, leadership and service opportunities, as well as an offering of additional layers of academic advising and co-curricular experiences. Honors students typically complete creative and research-based projects, have access to special study abroad trips, can use additional spaces and resources on campus, as well as participate in special ceremonies and recognitions.

In the last decades, efforts to address diversity in institutions of higher learning have created spaces where students, staff, and faculty of color, of lower socio-economic backgrounds, of various gender identities, and with a wider range of abilities are more and better represented in honors education. Yet, we continue to be immersed in institutional spaces and structures that were initially created by and for white men of privilege. I see my own story, my own background and access to higher education in this framework. I am a daughter of Mexican immigrants from a poor background who had very limited opportunities as children and young adults. My father grew-up in rural Mexico and was only allowed to attend school for six months since his father needed him in the fields. He immigrated to the United States in the early 1960s held various labor-intensive jobs and

eventually became a gardener. He married my mother in Mexico, brought her to the United States and once she was able to, she began adding to the family income with the skills she had brought with her as a seamstress. I attended public schools in the United States, spent four years in private schools in Mexico, and eventually finished middle and high school in the United States. I enjoyed school and learning but was not in a family where education was central; my parents supported us going to school but always valued getting a job and having an income as a greater need and priority. As a high school student, I was fortunate to be recruited by an organization called MESA (Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement). Through this group, I learned about the possibility of going to college after high school, I visited college campuses, received guidance on signing-up for and taking the SAT, and eventually applying to college. MESA opened a crucial door for me, the powerful, life-transforming door of equity by bridging my limited resources and family background to the possibility of attending college. I received a full scholarship to join a small, liberal arts college, and there, at the University of San Diego, continued my pursuit and enjoyment of learning. Through that scholarship, a second crucial door of equity opened for me, one that allowed me to pursue a college degree. Even though I held three part-time jobs simultaneously as an undergraduate so that I could cover my living expenses, I received the gift of having my educational expenses fully covered. Never did it cross my mind that honors programs existed on college campuses nor would I have felt that I belonged in one. I now realize that I met the requirements for honors as an undergraduate student. However, I did not know they existed, like so many of our students today, there is no awareness about honors education and how it opens amazing opportunities for learning and professional growth. How do you seek something you have never heard about? How do you pursue greater opportunities when the more basic ones have already been difficult to reach?

In this sense, equity in Honors education must begin with addressing access. Our Honors colleagues included in this volume understand this, they have responded to the question of access by rethinking recruitment and admissions processes. This is why conversations around admissions processes, requirements, eligibility, and population disparities must be at the core of addressing issues of equity in honors education. Because honors administrators understand the limitations of current admissions processes, we are reconsidering the value of standardized testing, looking at access to AP and other advanced courses as particular to high schools with greater funding, and paying attention to diversity of opportunity for honors applicants. There has been a shift from asking students to all meet the requirements that reflect the experiences of students with greatest access to understanding systemic

barriers and eliminating them in recruitment and retention of honors students as they enter higher education and complete their degrees. A more holistic approach to admissions and access to honors education has resulted in greater diversity and inclusion of different communities in honors.

Additionally, creating equity necessitates asking the hard questions associated with creating student-centered honors programs. At the core is a questioning of who the students are collectively and individually. There is sincere grappling with how to incorporate all students in the most meaningful way into honors programs. For some colleagues, the answer has come through a collaborative drafting and implementing of an institutionally or program-based equity plan; for others, there has been a focus on diversifying the honors curriculum and where possible, the faculty as well. Honors leaders have opened conversations about imposter syndrome and how to contest it by allowing our honors students new spaces to talk about difference, to express frustrations, to seek new avenues of learning that allow for difference in background and being, honoring those differences, and moving towards more tolerant and humane research and academic scholarship. Those conversations around difference and students' diverse needs simultaneously create a space for healing and co-participation in transforming honors programs. Peer-mentors and tutors in honors then readily insert themselves into receiving and giving needed support to move the whole community forward. Students honor their own identities, histories, needs, and challenges while inserting themselves into disciplinary research and inquiry that is more open to non-traditional understanding. Our diverse students' unique perspectives inform and transform our disciplines making current research much more relevant to our world today beyond and outside of European and Western traditions. Our willingness to alter our institutional spaces, to incorporate our diverse students while power-sharing with them in the ability to explore and create new knowledge, ultimately empowers our underrepresented students to feel themselves a part of our honors programs; it allows them to participate in collective learning and well-being as they prepare to become conscientious professionals who will give back to their communities in more meaningful ways. Culturally relevant honors courses, student-centered teaching and learning, access to research opportunities for low-income students, explaining the structures of higher education to first generation students, celebrating non-traditional local heroes, creating diversity pipelines, and seeking intentional campus and community collaborations to create structural change all transform honors education while moving us closer to eliminating current equity gaps.

Accordingly, the doors that were opened for me as a young person allowed me to complete a double major and bridge to graduate school,

eventually receiving my Master's degree and PhD from UCLA. Since then, I have spent 20 years of my professional life as a faculty member at CSU Fullerton (CSUF). In 2000 I became a tenure-track faculty member and in 2001 the Coordinator for the Latin American Studies Program on campus. That leadership role opened another crucial door whereby I began to understand my institution as a system: a place where departments live within the parameters of a college led by a dean, and the colleges fit within Academic Affairs, while there are other campus entities, many within Student Affairs, and each of those broader areas is under the leadership of a vice president who reports to the campus president. Understanding the workings of institutions of higher learning is not easy and it is even less so for first generation students who do not have a frame of reference to help contextualize how "the system" works. That is why so much of our work on equity must focus on how our institutions function, on the mechanisms that include and exclude students from the recruitment, admissions, and retention processes through graduation. Additionally, there are various levels of institutional power one has as you take on different roles. The closer you are to being a vice president, provost or president, the greater your institutional power to affect change. In my initial leadership role, supporting diversity and inclusion meant helping our campus community understand Latin America's diversity beyond our classes by hosting events and conferences that would foster awareness and celebrate the Native, African, Asian, and European influences that have shaped Mexico, Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean nations of today. The institutional power that I had was connected to supporting faculty and students in our pursuit of deeper understanding of the complexities of Latin America from an interdisciplinary perspective. It was with this particular background and experiences that I became involved with Honors education as a faculty mentor for students working on projects focused on Latin America.

Later, since 2015, I served as director of the CSUF University Honors Program. I am not a faculty member who seeks spaces of privilege but I do have a passion for interdisciplinary learning and creative thinking. Like many of my colleagues, I find the greatest joy in working with students, learning alongside them, and sharing new understanding. Within my own institution, while I was trying to find my way as a new director, I was also trying to find the appropriate voice and space for the work I wanted to do. This was revealed to me my second year as director after I had spent some time learning about the program, getting to know more students and faculty, and being exposed to honors at the national level through the National Collegiate Honors Council's (NCHC) annual conference and on-line resources. My own direction was guided by the fact that I am one of a few

female, first generation, Latinx, full professors at an HSI, public, comprehensive, regional university. I quickly learned that the demographics of the program I was directing did not reflect the larger campus and this became my mission, to grow and nurture this program while moving towards greater inclusion and reflection of all the student communities represented on the larger campus. To get there would require seeking a coalition of support throughout my campus, through partnerships with both student and academic affairs colleagues who could support this goal. Sustainable equity can only be achieved in this way, through campus partnerships, by reaching out to fellow campus leaders who will share the goal and leverage their power alongside honors leaders to achieve it.

Just as campus partnerships are powerful in achieving greater equity, so are networks outside of one's institution. In 2016, I connected with even more committed honors colleagues through the *National Society for Minorities in Honors* (NSFMIH) whose founder, Dr. Graeme Harper opened additional doors and learning opportunities for those of us seeking to improve issues of equity at our institutions. This community of committed scholars, leaders, and professionals have positioned themselves with our most vulnerable student populations to do everything in their power to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Their work inspires me; their humanity humbles me. These colleagues dedicate much of their time and energy to think about, address, and transform issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. With their experiences and expertise, I continued thinking about my own diverse background, the students I was trying to serve on my own campus, and ideas shared at the national level about how to better incorporate and represent diverse Honors students in general. The authors of this collection represent some of those voices and commitment to transformational honors education for diverse students. Each scholar is working within the limitations of her/his/their own institutional position knowing that whatever power is held is to be used to open the door of equity in honors education. A perspective of humility, of not knowing, and a strong desire to learn and do better, propel this work forward. In some cases, Honors community members have recognized their own history of privilege and benefit for people who are white, questioned those systems, disrupted them, and are now dedicating themselves to building alternate, more inclusive programs. This is the spirit of the work being done by colleagues from various institutions who are thinking about historical inequities and how to address them. They are not using their positions or institutional power to advance themselves or their own careers but sharing their spaces of privilege with students who would not otherwise know about honors education, its resources and rewards. The authors of this

collection and the research put forth speak to a desire to not only understand issues of equity and inclusion in Honors education, but to take action in removing barriers that have kept underrepresented students from accessing its resources. This collection from diverse authentic leaders who by no means claim to have the absolute answer to resolving issues of equity in honors education, reflect the insights gained from honest student-centered conversations, as well as dedicated time to understand and respond to our local student populations and the various labels that may prevent them from fully benefitting from honors education.

As a result of such efforts, many doors have been opened for underrepresented students seeking access to higher education, yet gaps continue as students transition to college and struggle to successfully complete their studies. First generation students and those who do not have access to institutional understanding quickly fall behind their peers with lower college GPAs, greater tendency to be on probation, longer time to degree, and misguided course selection. Thus, equity must go beyond admissions and continue to support students through graduation. Retaining diverse honors students necessitates responding to the particular needs of all students through culturally appropriate advising, diversification of honors faculty, diversification of the curriculum, incorporation of diverse student leaders, and additional advising that includes explanations of institutional functioning. Students need to learn how to withdraw from a class to avoid poor grades, how office hours are used to get needed support and excel academically, how to access free campus tutoring, how to expand one's support network and utilize resources to improve performance. Students should be encouraged to utilize health and wellness programs to manage stress and other feelings of isolation while seeking campus communities that better understand and support each diverse student, as well as strategically use honors resources to strengthen access to research opportunities, graduate school or professional employment. This volume speaks to these various needs and potential solutions for diverse honors students.

While students from more privileged backgrounds, whose parents had access to a college education, understand the multilayered benefits an honors program can offer, for underrepresented diverse students, honors can seem a locus of additional stress, graduation requirements, and unnecessary academic burden. Thus, addressing equity means translating for underrepresented students the benefits of honors education while creating programs that value diversity of being and understanding in today's world. Teaching the benefits of honors education to diverse students in the recruitment process is crucial to reach greater equity and inclusiveness. Students need to learn how access to smaller classes will allow them to receive more attention from faculty.

When students engage in a community such as honors, where the assumption is that students have greater intellectual ability, stereotypes and prejudices about particular underrepresented populations can be lifted; race, socio-economic background, physical ability, or gender identity become secondary as the honors label takes precedence.

Equity is a major issue in institutions of higher learning as it is in most social contexts including healthcare, K-12 education, access to housing, and an overall dignified life. To begin to respond, we must understand issues of equity before appropriate solutions can be identified. This volume collects the voices of honors colleagues who have dedicated themselves to dismantling barriers, creating fairer, more accessible honors programs. They document a sincere desire to move from ideas of greater inclusion to action, demonstrating their commitment to transforming diverse students' lives. They represent authentic leaders who show up to conversations on equity understanding institutional systems, the power accessed through their positions, and how to leverage it to open doors for our more vulnerable diverse community members. These scholars come to the conversation having looked in the mirror of the present and the past to understand the historical contexts that have privileged some and marginalized others. They have elicited questions from diverse students, listened to the responses, and adjusted their programs, goals, and methodologies to accommodate broader cultural understanding, physical abilities, gender identities, and more. They have gone beyond themselves to ensure our underrepresented minority students can also access institutional well-being and a successful completion of their degrees. To all who are committed to opening such crucial doors and sharing the keys used in doing so, I close with a heartfelt thank you. My own life was transformed through such generosity and today through the contributions made by colleagues represented in this volume alongside Dr. Graeme Harper's leadership through *NSFMIH*, we can continue to learn and grow as dedicated honors community members. To honors colleagues who seek answers, this collection offers solution models where various student-centered approaches affected change in diverse local communities. To honors students who share themselves openly and collaborate with us in transformational learning, please keep challenging us, keep demanding that we open more doors, that we understand your cultural language and needs, that we share your historical sorrows, that honors continues to include you and them for the well-being of *us*.

—Sandra M. Pérez, Director, University Honors Program,
California State University, Fullerton

INTRODUCTION

HONORS EDUCATION AND THE FOUNDATION OF FAIRNESS: A QUESTION OF EQUITY

GRAEME HARPER

Whether in considering Grade Point Average (GPA) for admission to an honors program or college, or deciding not to consider it at all, whether looking to improve diversity, and seeking strategies to do that, whether believing in inclusivity but wondering how to embed that ideal into programmatic work, the question of "what is fair?" announces itself constantly in honors education.

In part, ideas about deservedness are always manifest in notions of fairness. These appear in both personal and public guises. Personally, someone might find the fact their friend is six inches taller than they are and, they believe, for that reason always scores more in their regular pick-up game of basketball is entirely unfair. Personally, someone might find it kind of unfair that the kid next door, who isn't even old enough to drive, just inherited his uncle's classic Porsche.

But deservedness, from this personal point of view, isn't just about what you get, what you receive, what comes your way, it is also about whether you earned that thing or that accolade. So this is both the *what* and the *how* of achievement. "He didn't deserve first place" is a critical assessment of the worth of a contribution, but also a comparative judgement, perhaps against shared and public criteria or perhaps according to personal feelings about our own achievements. Such complexity of deservedness makes our judgements not only personal but cultural, defined by what is valued around us; and communal, defined by those closest to us, around us; and historical, defined by the attitudes and values of the moment we are living in.

The student who studied for a full two months for a Physics exam, and desperately wants to get into the Medial Physics Masters program, but

who scores in the bottom half of the class and therefore doesn't get the grades to get into that program might well figure that's unfair. Of course, so might their professor, who just can't understand what happened to such a dedicated student, and so might their parents, who know how much their daughter or son wanted to do that MP program, and so might their friends. They worked for it, so why can't they have it? Maybe the exam was badly written. Maybe there was a mistake in the marking?

The scenarios of personal deservedness, when attached to academic success, strain at definitions of fairness. Fair in this case meaning, for example, if you studied Chapters 5 and 6, because you heard they could be in the exam but actually the professor ended up setting the exam more from Chapters 4 and 7 – then it's easy to think of that as unfair. Was the professor clear enough about the preparation you should do? Did you somehow mishear the instructions? Is the universe conspiring against you? Why didn't you get what you deserved, given the amount of effort you put in?

Such personal deservedness is also about identity and it is about what we might call both the facts and perceptions of who we each are. It could be you're just not as good at Physics as you want to be. But why? Is there a gene for Physics prowess and you don't have it? Generally, you could curse nature or you could blame a lack of nurture. But whatever the reason, it doesn't seem fair – given the ideal of deservedness and given the amount of real effort you put in. There is some kind of mismatch happening, you feel.

Of course, personal deservedness isn't the end point, because the idea of deservedness has a public guise as well. Here shared societal beliefs and cultural ideals take the key role. These are often founded on what are believed to be traditions, and often on a sense of customariness. They even function as etiquette. If someone with a vastly different set of values, potentially with a distance (literally or figuratively) from the societal mainstream, is rewarded the notion is that some kind of bond of society has been broken or undermined. Of course, we enter into areas of prejudice and bias in this, and begin to see that there is clearly a connection between fairness and how we view equity, and that this relates to both personal and public impartiality – which might indeed not functionally exist at all (even if it exists in principle).

Impartiality suggests territory akin to similarity – by which is meant that fairness relates to equality but not necessarily to equity. In this, both personal and public senses of fairness are complex because to be impartial means to be free from favoring one thing, one person, over another; it also means viewing these things or persons objectively, apart from your own

circumstances or character, your own background or philosophy of life or, indeed, of education. Honors education sits uneasily with this because even just the word "honor" suggests the valuing of something defined by cultural and personal and historical influences, and the idea of "honors", the plural reference to a collective enterprise connected with honor, the honorable and the honored, seems anything but impartial. In fact, the partiality of honors – taking partiality in this case to simply mean favoring something or a fondness for something - is core to many of the ideals that inform honors colleges and honors programs. While we might strongly favor diversity, and seek to be inclusive, the enterprise of honors education itself is partial to certain attributes of education (such as disciplinary prowess and immersion in communities of learning). Honors education is symbolic. It is weighty, respectable, elevated and conscientious. And honors education favors a collective result that is bound to these ideals.

With this in mind, fairness and equality are wedded in honors education; but, seemingly, fairness and equity are not. Fairness and equity exist, instead, in an oblique relationship where rightness and justice come from adherence to ideals determined not by objectivity, but in a turning inward to the subjective foundations of what honors might mean in a given educational circumstance, by an established educational group for a determined educational purpose. That purpose, while informed by a belief in diversity and while interested in notions of inclusivity, is actually instead just as often a mechanism of social control and of cultural determination. In honors education, this suggests, not everyone can succeed or, to use an earlier word and concept, not everyone even *deserves* to succeed. Honors education becomes in this way not what it often declares itself to be – a bastion of diversity and a patron of inclusion – but a method of filtering out the undeserving and of promoting the inculpable and the guiltless.

The reasons why someone can't or doesn't succeed relate to the personal and public conditions of their lives. Surely, that is all but a truism. And surely too it is truistic to say that we are both culpable and guilty if we don't critically examine the ideals of honors education and in this way seek to understand and to pursue equity. What if, for another all too obvious example, given honors education (particularly here referring to college honors) begins at a certain point in that personal and public life and therefore has limited influence over the conditions that have formed, and are forming, the individual at the time they are planning to enter college? What then do we make of the idea of fairness if we do not examine this fact? Can we have any role in creating and supporting and developing a more equitable society if we fail to question ourselves?

The ideal of fairness also speaks to the principles of a humanity where those who are endowed, blessed or even who have earned more should in some way, and somehow, share their good fortune with those who have less. The person with less might not, after all, be responsible for the conditions they face. That for starters. Even further we find the advantages of shared success being not simply benevolence but akin to and powered by ideals of relational personhood. In this way, if humanity favors the communal good, and we believe in the power of social justice to lift up the human species, in its entirety, to make us all more able to survive and to each and all live good lives, then fairness suggests not equality but in fact equity, by which we ensure the provision of conditions and support and policies and economic, social and personal action that lifts all up to the same place. Not just equal access, equal opportunity, but the addressing of injustices, and the critical examination of deservedness so that all human beings are seen as equally deserving and provided with the tools to ensure this deservedness is addressed.

Of course, all this is not yet what we produce in honors education. We are instead currently situated between fairness defined by a type of deservedness (earning the right to pursue honors, in some way, for some reason), fairness informed by a type of impartiality (which, in fact, is partiality explained by ideals of educational success bound in cultural and historical norms) and a fairness where equity is more like equality at most, and difference is only celebrated to a point, because the ideals of honors education ask for justice and just treatment only as far as those ideals themselves remain unchallenged.

Perhaps in all this we confront the true difficulties of creating and ensuring an equitable honors education. A situation where the deontological norms might need to be challenged if the consequences of the existence and actions of honors colleges and programs is to be truly positive. We get closer to an informed exploration of the potential we each and all have to change things for the better by critically examining where diversity, equity and inclusion intersect and interact (to use those terms in their most commonly used order). By focusing this book, *Honors Education and the Foundation of Fairness: A Question of Equity*, on equity we thus essentially also explore diversity and inclusion. The authors in this book bring light to conditions of inequity when they shine a light on questions of enrollment in honors programs, on advising of honors students, on the existence or non-existence of civility, on support for a wide range of identities, on collaboration, and on types and styles of pedagogy – to name a few areas explored in the book.

Finally (or to begin, perhaps) we might ask, as we explore the topics here: “Should honors education be built on a solid foundation of fairness?”. I leave the answer to that question to the reader.

CHAPTER ONE

COLLECTING CREDENTIALS AND COMBATING IMPOSTER SYNDROME: EQUITY IN HONORS

ASHLEEN WILLIAMS, RACHEL COLEMAN, JOSHUA MANNERY AND KAYCI SIMMONS

Abstract

This chapter engages a holistic exploration of equity in honors, and the ways in which an honors education both cultivates and combats feelings of imposter syndrome. Using the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College at the University of Mississippi as a case study, it explores the challenges honors programs and colleges face in creating diverse entering classes, and cultivating students who will take intellectual risks, while also understanding the pressures honors students face to achieve seemingly impossible standards in academics, service, and leadership. Particular attention will be paid to the way minority students are disadvantaged in a process that frequently rewards prior opportunity over potential. We discuss policies, programming, and equity in honors that help shape an innovative and equitable education. Additionally, this chapter explores the relationship between an increasingly competitive academic world and imposter syndrome, as well as ways students at the University of Mississippi have worked to overcome these challenges. We will also focus on the effort of honors policies that reward qualities like mettle, innovation, and leadership, and how these policies change the discourse around what it means to be an honors student.

Introduction

Imposter syndrome, also referred to as imposter phenomenon, is an internalized feeling of inadequacy, which can, and often does, continue despite success or merit. Individuals may attribute their successes to luck, or to having fooled others into overestimating their merit and intelligence.[1] Honors students at the University of Mississippi have expressed feelings of imposter syndrome that continue to influence and shape their university experience. For example, Kayci Kimmons, a student at the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College (SMBHC), writes "When I do succeed, I'm more inclined to chalk my accomplishments up to luck than I am to recognize that I am capable, prepared, or even intelligent. The root of these insecurities stem from a belief that I am not deserving." Kimmons highlights an approach that many of our students unconsciously, or even consciously, use when taking ownership over their accomplishments and achievements. Similarly, Joshua Mannery, another SMBHC student, expresses the ongoing challenge of dealing with imposter syndrome, saying "As an African-American male from Jackson [MS] I am still struggling from the damage of having to constantly assert to myself that I belonged in the same room as students who came from more developed and supported educations from other areas of the nation." Mannery points to an important reality that takes place within much of the nation, but is particularly pronounced at a predominately white institution in a southern state with significant gaps in education, income and opportunity. This is also well documented in the academic literature. Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso noted that at predominantly white institutions, some African American students felt "being viewed as a numerical racial minority seemed to translate into being ignored in class"[2] and ongoing negative interactions with faculty instilled a feeling or sense of self-doubt.[3] This experience was not limited to faculty, and extends to interactions with peers, thereby reinforcing a sense of imposter syndrome or potentially driving students to work harder in an effort to prove to others that they deserve to be in the same spaces.

Our chapter focuses on imposter syndrome and academic culture at the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College at the University of Mississippi, and what efforts are undertaken to create a positive, inclusive academic environment that prepares citizen scholars who are fired by the life of the mind, committed to the public good, and driven to find solutions. Importantly, we recognize that the issue of imposter syndrome affects students regardless of race, status as first generation, or socio-economic background. However, we also argue that the feeling of imposter syndrome is often enhanced at the intersections of these identities, and for an honors

college or program to pursue equity in honors, we must engage meaningfully in conversations and reform efforts to address both credentialing culture and imposter syndrome. Accordingly, this chapter illuminates specific details about the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College at the University of Mississippi, and examines some of its successes as well as failures in combating imposter syndrome and creating a more equitable environment. It concludes with recommendations for possible paths forward that can dismantle systems that perpetuate inequality, foster imposter syndrome, and improve the overall student experience.

Honors at The University of Mississippi

The University of Mississippi, and the Honors College in particular, offers a unique perspective on the issue of imposter syndrome and the pursuit of equity in honors due in part to its geography, its history, and its contemporary efforts to create a more inclusive, equitable environment. The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College (SMBHC) at the University of Mississippi is located in Oxford, Mississippi. The University of Mississippi is the state's flagship university, and is designated as a Research 1 university by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, with more than 24,000 students at its combined campuses. Entering first year classes averaged 3,500 students for the last five years. The University of Mississippi is a predominantly white institution, with a difficult history of race relations that continue until today. In academic year 2018-2019, of the 20,000 students at the Oxford campus, approximately 24% students reported an ethnicity other than white. African American students constitute approximately 12% of the total student population,[4] despite making up 37.8% of Mississippi's total population.[5] The University of Mississippi was also the site of violent White supremacist riots in 1962, when James Meredith enrolled in the university with the assistance of federal troops, and in 1970 when the University ordered the mass arrest of Black students who were protesting racial discrimination on campus.

In an effort to attract and retain students of diverse backgrounds, the university has worked to support its students through the creation of targeted programing. Examples of this include Students*FIRST*, which specifically aims to support first year first generation students in their transition to higher education, and the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement, which works to develop programs and services that support the University of Mississippi's core value of inclusiveness. There are also residential programs that equip students with skills for higher education success

through placement in living-learning communities with robust programing. Centers and programs like these are critical in fostering student achievement and creating a more equitable environment in Mississippi.

In comparison to the relatively large entering first year class for the general university, the SMBHC has an average entering class of 420 students each year, or just over 10% of the incoming class. According to student members of our honors college, an honors student in 2020 has a mindset that constantly drives them to utilize their passion for learning and developing to further some aspect of the world they live in. Above anything else, an honors student learns and leads with love on their sleeve: a love for knowledge, community, and scholarship. This peer generated definition is also a reflection on the stated mission of the SMBHC, to prepare citizen scholars who are fired by the life of the mind, committed to the public good, and driven to find solutions.

One of the goals of the SMBHC is to serve the students of Mississippi, and to offer its highest achieving students a strong liberal arts education at the Flagship institution. In that respect, the SMBHC strives for in-state residents to constitute a majority of its entering class. Over the last five years, in-state residents have typically made up approximately 55% of first year students. In-state students are similarly represented in our merit-based scholarship pools. The other 45% of students come primarily from other states in the nation; however, there are also some international students. Given our in-state student focus, we recognize the need to be attentive to issues of, and challenges to, equity and access that manifest from Mississippi's particular socio-economic and racial history. Mississippi consistently ranks in the last five in the nation when it comes to K-12 education, economy, and healthcare.[6] The state's education funding formula, combined with a history of segregation academies and contemporary school choice, has resulted in significant disparities in education throughout the state, and is a reality that higher education must deal with when students arrive on campus. Students enter a classroom which strives to offer equal opportunity, but must also endeavor to create equity. This is directly reflected in Mannery's statement that he, and others, are consistently having to assert themselves in classrooms where their peers are coming from both sides of the K-12 spectrum. Honors students at the University of Mississippi represent an interesting duality in the classroom, with some coming from some of the best funded private schools in the country, and others coming from schools that are recently subject to state take over and unjust politicization of school funding.

In addition to the reality of where students come from, there is the environment on campus which results in a "credentialing culture" and in

turn, both produces and reinforces feelings of imposter syndrome. Kumar and Jagacinski hypothesized that feelings of imposter fears would be linked with ability and task-approach goals.[7] Their study, which primarily focused on differences between men and women, suggested that "simple improvement at a task is not seen as producing feelings of competence for women who have imposter fears; instead they must outperform others to feel competent."[8] Anecdotally, a similar trend emerges at the University of Mississippi. Much like its regional counterparts, there tends to be an image of what it means to be an active and involved student on campus, who is rewarded through credentialing systems like the "Who's Who" ceremony, personality elections, and Hall of Fame, and through coveted student engagement opportunities like being an Orientation Leader, Columns Society member, or being an Ambassador. Both highly sought after and highly visible, these opportunities and pathways for recognition also tend to draw honors students who are often accustomed to levels of high involvement and achievement. Accordingly, participation in these organizations is often recognized as *the* pathway to success at the University of Mississippi, and by implication, after obtaining an undergraduate degree, instead of as opportunities among many for success. With this in mind, honors students, staff, faculty, and administrators are working to dismantle a culture of collecting credentials in an effort to achieve multiple objectives. First, to encourage students to find and act upon their passion; second, to engage in a broader, deeper, and more complex education; and finally, third, to cultivate an inclusive, equitable environment that helps to combat feelings of imposter syndrome amongst students.

Beyond the broader campus culture, our Honors College is built around the premise of promoting self-efficacy amongst our students, providing a variety of opportunities and the means of supporting their endeavors. Policies we employ that exemplify qualities such as mettle, innovation, and leadership include our Freshmen Ventures trip, the Barksdale Award, and funding support for opportunities such as attending and presenting at conferences, studying abroad, unpaid internships and co-op experiences. Our programs are unstructured by design in an effort to foster self-efficacy; this widens the gap in those disparities. While everyone has the same opportunity of information, not everyone has the same background or educational tools to utilize and take advantage of these programs, which hinders efforts in equity.

Our first year students have the opportunity to participate in a mini-social research trip, anywhere in the nation, called "Freshman Ventures," where they have to interview someone of their choosing based on the year's themed question. This opportunity is exclusively for first year students, who

form a team of up to five members to design a trip, secure research permissions and formulate a budget in accordance with the allowance set by the Honors College. Freshman Ventures questions aim to open possibilities and multiplicities of answers, and have included 'What Unites Us?', 'What does the majority owe the minority?', 'Are there things we should not know?' and 'Who is my community? Whom do I fear?". This funded opportunity is often a highlight of an honors student's experience at the SMBHC, but it requires that students in their first two months of school overcome any hesitancy about jumping into a highly unstructured project, and embarking on a trip with strangers. In senior exit survey data, students who did not participate in Freshman Ventures cited a lack of knowledge, disinterest, and notably, several students expressed a feeling of being overwhelmed or intimidated by the project which posed a barrier to their participation.

Other programming includes funded research as well as competitive awards for internships, independent projects, and study abroad. Many of our students conduct research that is presented at annual conferences in their disciplines, and the Honors College actively attempts to help offset the cost of travel expenditures and registration. In addition to this, our Barksdale Award is awarded, annually, to two students who pursue independent research projects outside of the 'normal' scope of a study abroad venture or organized summer program. With the sole criteria of "Make us Jealous," the Barksdale requires a student envision themselves undertaking a project wholly on their own. In order to be eligible for the award, students must design a project that is outside of a structured program, has a detailed budget, and is both feasible and enviable. While the ambiguity of the award serves to inspire, it also has the unintended effect of reinforcing a simmering mentality that it isn't for everyone. While this approach drives much of our mission to cultivate citizen scholars, we realize that this potentially reinforces feelings of imposter syndrome amongst students. Therefore, the SMBHC must take stock of the way it approaches these programs and consider alternative ways to build in structures that would foster equity. The sheer volume of opportunity and experiences can sometimes contribute to an environment that fosters imposter syndrome, and can also create a widely misunderstood model of what a "successful honors student" looks like.

Efforts in Equity

Efforts in equity at the University of Mississippi focus on the creation of an environment wherein students are first recruited, admitted and retained. Imposter syndrome and a culture of collecting credentials serves as both

barrier and catalyst for compelling and innovative policy solutions. To this end, educators across the nation have worked to systematize our understanding of how to combat imposter syndrome and engage in meaningful conversation about what a successful undergraduate career is comprised of, as well as how it is obtained. At the University of Mississippi, Norris Allen Edney has contributed to ground breaking work on barriers to Black male success and mentorship.[9] In responding to the research question, "Do successful Black males perceive mentorship as important to their persistence at the University of Mississippi?", Edney found that mentors provided a multi-faceted support, but respondents "reserved the designations of *mentor* and *mentoring* for the people and support they perceived as particularly contributive to their collegiate success and concerned with their wellbeing."[10] Furthermore, "Mentoring provided respondents with much needed psychosocial and emotional support and developed knowledge, self-efficacy, and social capital which they perceived as relevant to their success in college."[11] Edney's findings on mentoring and mentorship, in particular with regard to self-efficacy and social capital as well as various types of support serve as a foundation for the ways in which the SMBHC can develop programing to increase retention and graduation rates amongst underrepresented minority or first-generation status students.

Within an honors context, much work has been done by Jennifer Parsons on the experiences of African American students and the Honors College experience at the University of Mississippi. Parsons identified the prevalence of imposter syndrome among students from diverse backgrounds, writing that over a ten year period several students expressed feelings of dismay or disbelief that they were selected based on merit.[12] Parsons' research found "numerical critical mass, shared identity and resiliency impact the persistence and success of African American students enrolled in the SMBHC."[13] Parsons conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with African American students in the SMBHC, and was able to systematically identify areas for improvement that would influence recruitment, admissions, and retention.

Efforts in equity at the SMBHC are often approached through a method that includes representation, targeted programming, and multifaceted recruitment strategies. We know that feelings of imposter syndrome are likely to create barriers to both recruitment and retention, and addressing this phenomenon is a core component of pursuing equity in Honors.

One of the first ways in which the Honors College has attempted to ensure equity in honors was to reform the admissions process, and to further emphasize the value and benefit of a holistic application. The admissions committee conducts a rigorous academic screening process

wherein each application is reviewed by three committee members who rank each application individually. In our efforts to focus on the holistic application, in our latest admission cycle (for AY 2020-2021), the admissions committee elected to eliminate standardized test scores from the first round of review. As such, the committee only had access to the application, recommendation letters, and transcripts. Test scores were not a part of the package for review, to eliminate 'bias' or having a decision influenced by a number. The committee had to rely on other criteria to evaluate each prospect on other merits, such as writing, creativity, recommendation letters, and/or participation in school or community as demonstrated in the application or on the resume. Each committee member reads the applications, then all members convene at a designated meeting time and/place to discuss rankings and recommendations. There is an opportunity to defend or support the recommendations if the three did not unanimously agree, with the head of the committee keeping notes on all recommendations for each applicant. This has not only improved diversity amongst the entering class, but our hope is that it will result in reforming a test and score centric culture that dominates conversation in the first weeks of the academic term. Additionally, by limiting the emphasis placed on test scores, we intend to dismantle arbitrary indicators of inclusion or belonging, while fostering a sense of equity and inclusion. In short, we seek to avoid creating a culture wherein students who have only achieved near perfect test scores feel included in the Honors College.

Additionally, the growth of a more diverse student population highlights the importance of representation amongst the staff and faculty at the Honors College, especially in creating an environment that advances inclusion and helps combat feelings of imposter syndrome. The SMBHC has typically operated with a fairly lean staff, and as a result racial and ethnic diversity among the staff and faculty of the SMBHC has been an ongoing challenge. For much of the last twenty years, there has only been one or two staff members of color out of ten, which has been similar with regard to honors faculty who teach the freshman seminar sequence. More recently, however, there has been attention given to this consideration, and some concerted efforts to remedy this issue of representation. The SMBHC administration, staff and faculty are engaged in ongoing dialogue about the ways in which faculty and staff representation subtly contribute to feelings of imposter syndrome amongst our students. Additionally, training and involvement with the Center for Diversity and Inclusion for all honors staff and faculty aims to remedy educational barriers. Referencing the experiences of Black males, Edney argues "pursuing equality in opportunity is an insufficient approach to addressing disparities in educational outcomes.

[…] Pursuing equality in opportunity alone cannot account for the effects of internalizing these perceptions."[14] This reality, that equality of opportunity is not sufficient to attain equity in education, also has to be at the heart of conversations around imposter syndrome, and pursuing equity in honors.

In 2018, the SMBHC met with underrepresented minority students in the Honors College to assess some of their needs, and to see what spaces could be created in order to improve their experiences within the college. As a result of this, the Honors College Minority Engagement Council was formed in an attempt to create an academic counterspace for honors minority students.[15] The Honors College Minority Engagement Council (HoCoMEC) fosters an environment that promotes interconnectivity, cultivates greatness in academia, and generates a respectful community that opens dialogue for minority students within the SMBHC. HoCoMEC hosts fun activities throughout the year and partners with other groups, like Honors Senate, the Black Student Union, and Active Minds, for engaging programming. The SMBHC has demonstrated its commitment to the HoCoMEC by providing it funding on par with the honors senate, and by offering programmatic support for its activities. Additionally, members of the HoCoMEC have been able to participate in targeted student recruitment, and have sent postcards to incoming students to welcome them to the Honors College. HoCoMEC maintains correspondence with incoming students to welcome them, and in the early years of its existence this has proven to be an effective way to create community within the college. Through carving out this particular niche for these students, it in return helps build a stronger attachment to the program itself. Additionally, the HoCoMEC serves as a mechanism for accountability for our staff and faculty to deliver on promises related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Members of HoCoMEC leadership often work in tandem with SMBHC senior leadership to address significant national moments, and to identify spaces wherein needs are not being met. This academic counterspace creates an environment to counter the awkward feeling that occurs when students walk into a classroom where no one looks like them, and to serve as a reminder that they belong in the Honors College.

The second space that the SMBHC has created in order to cultivate an environment of inclusivity, and to start to address underlying issues of imposter syndrome amongst our students, is the First Generation Honors Student Network. This group is an informal support network for students who are the first in their immediate family to attend a four year university after high school, and attempts to dispel the hidden curriculum and to create a space in which students can give voice to the challenges and obstacles they may face that are not shared by their peers. According to exit surveys

administered by the SMBHC each year, approximately 10% of our students identify as first generation college students. The First Generation Honors Student Network also connects first generation faculty and staff with honors students in order to create a space in which students can ask questions, see successful students who break outside a predefined model, and connect with faculty and staff who have an understanding of the unique challenges this group faces. It is also a way for faculty and staff to combat the credential collecting culture of the University of Mississippi by reinforcing to our first generation students that they do not have to follow a particular model, path or equation for success. It also allows for open conversation about imposter syndrome, and endeavors to equip students with the skills to overcome it.

However, despite these efforts toward combating imposter syndrome and collecting credentials, sometimes global events have created additional challenges. The Covid-19 global pandemic highlighted some of the issues honors students face, and unfortunately has reinforced challenges for access and equity as well as feelings of imposter syndrome. As campus wide closures have demonstrated, some differences that impact success and access in higher education are camouflaged by students being physically present on campus with relatively even access to resources through the library, individual academic units or other facilities. At the SMBHC, students have uniform access twenty-four hours a day to wireless internet, quiet study spaces, and computer labs if they do not have sufficient technological capabilities at home or in their residence. However, the closure of campus in March 2020 led to students having to return home and face the reality of uneven internet access, additional pressures on time due to family and social commitments, and loss of revenue by the suspension of on campus employment. Some students reported being told by their families and communities that they didn't belong at a four year campus, or would probably drop out when they expressed nervousness or anxiety about exams or assignments. Anxiety over a sense of being worthy of being in honors or at the University is also heightened by the widespread cancellation of summer internships or programming. Students may feel a need to increase their extracurricular involvement, regardless of interest or passion, in order to make up for lost time or lost opportunities. This is becoming especially clear as students express concern over competitive job markets and an increase in graduate school applications.