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## The Relevance of an Honors Education

Mari Castañeda  
*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

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WORKING PAPER

**The Relevance of an Honors Education**

Mari Castañeda, PhD

Dean, Commonwealth Honors College & Professor, Department of Communication

University of Massachusetts Amherst

In this moment of ongoing COVID-19, intensifying racial injustice, and deepening economic inequalities, it is more imperative than ever for an honors education to play a role in helping students see their research and learning as contributing to the common good. The strength of many honors programs is their orientation toward the liberal arts, and the deep history of this emphasis in fact places the honors academic experience in a unique position to investigate the vast changes facing our world. Therefore, as faculty and staff working closely with students in honors educational settings, we need to continuously reflect on how the purpose of an honors education needs to adapt in order to inspire our students to understand and engage seriously with today's most pressing issues.

As a relatively new dean of the Commonwealth Honors College at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, I'm beginning to think collaboratively with students, faculty and staff about how we move forward with providing an honors experience that is more than just about achieving a high GPA, Latin honors, or gaining research experience to place on a resume. Honors students today are eager to make a difference in the broader social world through investigations into community architecture, institutional racism, environmental

conservation, digital theater, public health access and communication networks, just to name a few of the topics of recent honors theses in our Honors College. For many students, proposing and completing the honors thesis is an especially critical and special moment in their academic journey as undergraduates. In many cases, it is a life changing opportunity to go deep into a topic that inspires curiosity and a desire to understand the many complicated layers that shape the issue we are investigating. I know from experience how important an honors education can be for a college student, including the great fulfillment of writing an honors thesis, especially after being guided by the compassionate generosity of a professor who valued my questions, confusion, 'aha' moments, emerging writing praxis, and great potential as the daughter of Mexican parents who came to the United States when they were adolescents. My mother was especially important in inspiring me to reject the negative media stereotypes and narratives about Latinx communities that are often circulated and reinforced in school settings, work environments and political rhetoric. Although my mom had sixth grade education, she motivated my siblings and I in our educational pursuits.

It is this experience and the reality of the moment we are in today that has me asking how our Honors College and all the people affiliated with it, including faculty, staff and alumni, can play a role in guiding and inspiring students to engage in an honors educational journey that contributes towards social and racial justice and creating a better world for all. Towards this effort, it is also imperative to closely examine how our policies, practices, programming and curriculum encourage critical reflexivity, reciprocity, and engagement with topics and conversations that will open doors towards transformation of the self and our broader social world. These are not new ideas since many Honors Colleges

across the country, including the one I currently lead, have made serious headway in developing programs that challenge students not only academically, but also in their understanding of how racial, health, and economic inequities shape our society. What I see this particular moment doing, however, is placing these issues front in center of an honors education in order to transform our students' experience of their honors courses and research activities as something more than a curricular check and more of a pathway to engage in the social change that is possible from a variety of fields such as STEM, humanities, social science, public health, and business management. And as the student demographics of our country continue to change in ways that are exciting and dynamic for its rich diversity, honors education in the U.S. has an opportunity to deepen its ongoing efforts to help students think through their purpose as emerging scholars and future leaders in a rapidly changing world. We need honors students who can adapt to this reality as well as appreciate the importance of investigating how inequities in all forms persist and what can be done to address them.

A review of the literature of honors education already demonstrates a shift from traditional notions of honors as simply being about educating high achieving students to one in which honors pedagogies cultivate not only the mind but also the spirit so our students become leaders in creating a more inclusive world. Such reorientation broadens the purpose of an honors education and helps us rethink how we can achieve academic excellence, which is so often emphasized as a marker for deeming an honors program or college rigorous and its students brilliant. Yet the kind of brilliance needed in today's world must go beyond quantitative figures and would ideally include a commitment to exploring the opportunities and possibilities of reimagining new ways of thinking, doing, and being

together in the world. We need honors students who see themselves as global citizens, not just as residents of the United States. By enacting a global citizenship education, we can cultivate what UNESCO views as an essential part of today's world — the interdependence of humanity. Honors colleges have a great opportunity to build bridges between students, disciplinary worlds, and communities who want to engage in collective thinking about pressing issues. Regionally and nationally, members of non-profit organizations, employees from a range of business sectors, and students, faculty and staff from the wide spectrum of education are indeed pressing upon institutions to acknowledge and address racial injustice, economic inequalities, and implicit bias. In doing the deep reflection and hard work necessary to create a more equitable honors college, and thus world, we also build the capacity to produce positive changes in our students' lives and the impact they will have on their communities.