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Simul Fortior: The Rise of an Honors Collaborative and The Justice Challenge

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Abstract

A group of honors professionals from 14 U.S. institutions recently emerged to develop approaches to prepare students to address the world's grand challenges. This collaborative—a group of individuals in sustained partnership—had a shared passion and quickly began functioning as a team to prepare a recently funded federal higher education grant proposal. Over time, the team has identified additional intellectual endeavors to shape the future of honors education. Each professional shares specific skills in service to the collaborative's larger goals. Leadership for initiatives transitions to those with relevant expertise and passion and is often shared among multiple people. Members of the Collaborative trust that they are *simul fortior*—better together—in this high-functioning and reciprocally beneficial working relationship. This article outlines the benefits others may realize in forming similar honors collaboratives.

Keywords: *honors; collaborative; intellectual endeavors; project management; teamwork; grand challenges*

1. Introduction

Honors education works within collaborative spaces and seeks to build interdisciplinary and programmatic bridges within and between institutions (Nichols et al., 2019). We recognize three honors-related forms of inter-institutional collaboration: 1) honors organizations—formal networks with membership and benefits, including periodic conferences, trainings, and listservs; 2) honors communities of practice—formal or informal regular exchanges of ideas and practices; and 3) honors collaboratives—actively engaged networks of professionals working towards a common purpose or intellectual pursuit. Although each of the three forms creates space to engage with colleagues toward mutual aims, an honors collaborative can capitalize on the networks formed through organizations and communities of practice to provide participating honors educators room to innovate and tackle grand challenges.

The Collaborative described here was incubated within the Council on Honors Education (CoHE; <https://www.cohe-aplu.org/>), when the Student Engagement Committee called for partners in a trans-institutional project to prepare students to address the world’s most challenging problems. Often called wicked problems, these challenges defy easy solutions (Buchanan, 1992). Here, we detail the process our group used to cooperate on writing (and re-writing) a federal grant proposal, and how this effort transformed the group into ongoing collaborators. The concept behind our grant—to leverage the combined resources of our institutions to address worldwide food insecurity, climate, and sustainable agriculture—has been used by the Collaborative in additional endeavors, catalyzing further innovations in honors education. We believe that the success of this Collaborative provides a new framework for pursuing projects of interest to honors educators beyond boundaries: geographic, disciplinary, and topical. This is our story, which we share to provide a blueprint for future high-impact exchanges among honors educators around the globe.

2. Collaboration Structures in Honors

We start by detailing three forms of professional cross-institutional relationship-building in honors (i.e., honors organizations, communities of practice, and collaboratives) and how such relationship-building led to the emergence of the CoHE Higher Education Challenge Collaborative (hereafter “the Collaborative”).

Honors Organizations

Honors organizations are the most formalized of the three structures and are the source of the networks that led to convening the eventual members of the Collaborative. The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC, 2022), established in 1966, is the largest honors organization in the U.S. It offers professional development through annual meetings and workshops for honors programs and colleges. In 2013, the Honors Education at Research Universities (HERU, 2022) organization was formed to focus on the best, scalable practices in honors education at research universities. In 2020, the Council on Honors Education was formed to elevate honors education to the forefront of the missions and visions of major

institutions and their leaders (CoHE, 2022). CoHE provides frequent interactions and collaborative opportunities for honors colleges and programs from member institutions.

There are also geographic and affinity group honors associations that support members and students, with several of these organizations meeting regularly (e.g., annual conferences, leadership meetings). For example, the National Association of African American Honors Programs (NAAAHP, 2022), founded in 1990, draws membership from the more than 100 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and, more recently, from predominantly Black institutions (PBIs). The National Society for Minorities in Honors (2022) was founded in 2015 with an open membership for individuals and institutions seeking to advance knowledge in diversity, equity, and inclusion in honors.

In Europe, Wolfensberger (2015) led the first comprehensive investigation of honors or talent development programs. This research revealed a desire among honors professionals to connect to others in the field; as a result, the European Honors Council and the *Journal of the European Honors Council* were established in 2015 and 2017, respectively (Wolfensberger, Fritz, & Hogenstijn, 2017).

Honors Communities of Practice

While professional organizations offer many benefits, meeting only once or twice annually may leave members isolated for most of the year. Thus, honors leaders fill the void in between meetings with informal discussions. Efforts that cultivate a community of members who participate regularly are often referred to as communities of practice (Jenkins & Endersby, 2019; McCormick & Dooley, 2005). Examples of communities of practice include a regular meeting of honors deans and directors from four-year public institutions in Texas, organized in collaboration with the Council of Public University Presidents and Chancellors (CPUPC, 2023), and honors deans and directors from the member schools of the Southeastern Conference (SEC). While communities of practice may have informal leadership, they are typically characterized by a cooperative rather than a hierarchical organization. Honors communities of practice add value to professionals because they provide a space to explore common challenges, share insights, and offer and receive mentorship. These communities may arise out of larger organizations and serve participants who are united by place or topically by interests or goals. The NCHC Professional Development Committee has recognized the need for communities of practice (NCHC, 2021) and has announced the launch of a community of practice hosted collaboratively by several committees of the NCHC (Bott-Knutson et al., 2022).

Honors Collaboratives

In learning collaboratives, people with varied expertise convene to provide integrated and sustainable solutions for pressing concerns (Hanson et al., 2018). Collaboratives have been used in honors to leverage interdisciplinarity to address high-priority challenges (Amar et al., 2016). Collaboratives provide more than a space to exchange knowledge and experiences, though they accomplish these goals as well. The Transnational CoTalent Project (active from 2017 to 2020) offers a notable example of a collaborative through which nine European

organizations co-created a framework resulting in a set of tools for teachers, allowing for continued learning and network building (Koot, 2021).

Collaboratives are rarer than communities of practice, though a few have emerged given the desire of many honors professionals to explore ways to prepare students for a complicated world of difficult and interconnected problems. Collaboratives are also notable for their ability to leverage professional networks toward meeting mutual goals, typically on challenges that exceed the capacities of individuals—or individual institutions—to solve. Thus, organizations and communities of practice as networking spaces can serve as antecedents to more goal-focused or challenge-centered collaboratives.

3. The Rise of the Collaborative and Introduction of The Justice Challenge Pedagogical Framework

A group of honors professionals associated with CoHE convened in August, 2020 to support student engagement projects addressing intractable problems. By October, the group identified and started to work on a request for proposals for a small grant to develop a cross-institutional program. As the proposal was developed, the founding members of the Collaborative had several realizations. First, we discovered we had overlapping interests and distinct areas of expertise. Second, we identified a common viewpoint that honors education is improved by drawing upon multiple perspectives. Third, we recognized that the project we conceptualized was larger than the initial grant proposal could support. Fourth, we noticed that we enjoyed the collaboration and each other's company. Each of these realizations became building blocks that formed the foundation of an expanded Collaborative—leading us to the larger challenge of submitting and receiving a \$750,000 United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Higher Education Challenge (HEC) federal grant with similar aims, but a much-expanded scope (USDA, 2022).

Members outlined a rough vision for the Collaborative and strategies for preparing students to address the world's most complex problems through systems thinking (Appel et al., 2023). This approach was inspired by the earlier success of Dean Emeritus Tim Nichols in obtaining USDA HEC funding for South Dakota State University to address the grand challenges using honors as a catalyst to spark innovative pedagogy, discovery, and outreach (Nichols et al., 2019). The Collaborative built upon this pedagogical framework to design robust, systems-thinking-based approaches for cross-institutional collaboration. For 10 weeks, members outlined the pedagogical framework for the Collaborative and strategies for preparing honors students to address the world's most complex problems through systems thinking. The focus was on systems thinking because “the transition to a sustainable society requires ... an emphasis on sufficiency, equity, and quality of life rather than on quantity of output” (Meadows et al., 1993), and this tool helps make clear “the relationship between structure and behavior” (Meadows, 2008). The Collaborative built upon this pedagogical framework to design robust systems thinking for cross-institutional collaboration. Our goal in developing an innovative educational framework was to increase the number and diversity of honors graduates who, by working on grand challenges that society faces, are well prepared to lead us towards a more humane world. We entitled our USDA grant proposal and resulting program The Justice Challenge (Kotinek et al., 2023).

The Justice Challenge (TJC) expands notions of civic and community engagement beyond citizenship, philanthropy, and service to reimagine the promotion of equity, diversity, and inclusion within our institutions and across our communities. Instead of an intervention with a linear cause-effect approach, the framework draws on systems theory to investigate large-scale complex systems and their impacts on issues of food, climate change, and sustainable agriculture. TJC (Figure 1) provides students with three distinct educational experiences: 1) a nine-week series of virtual events drawing on expertise across the U.S. to deliver subject content and deepen collaborative skills; 2) one of three immersive Signature Experiences differing in length and pedagogical approach, including a weekend hackathon, a one-week field course, and a semester-long design challenge; and 3) a culminating virtual conference where all experiences are synthesized, shared and discussed.

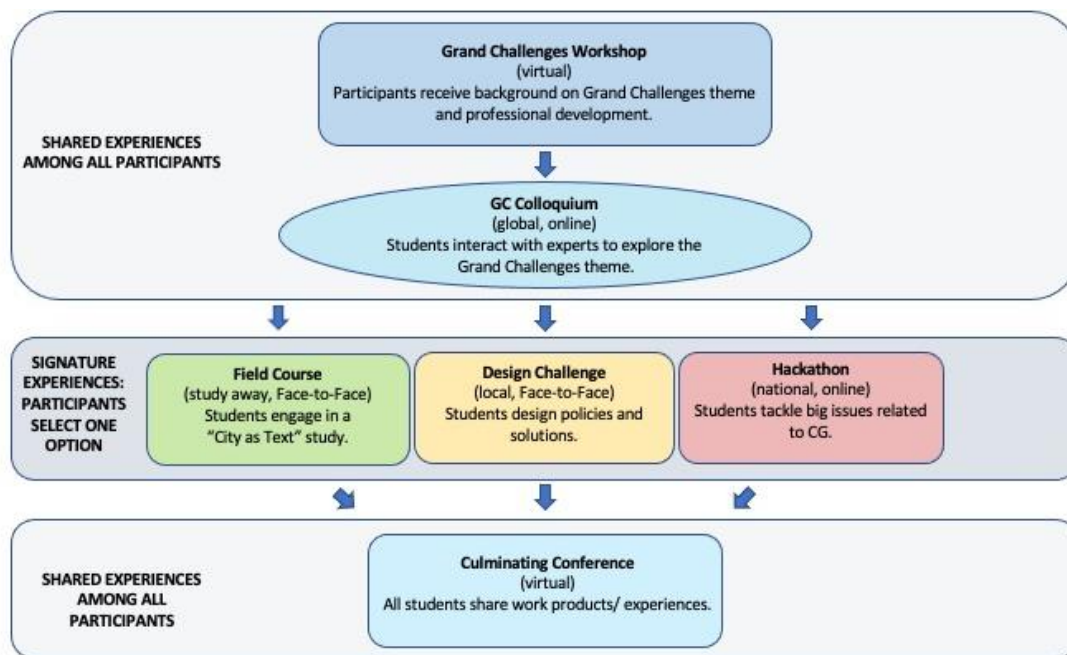


Figure 1. Pedagogical Framework of The Justice Challenge.

Members of the Collaborative continue to lay the foundation for our novel educational experiences outlined in TJC through piloting and validating components of our framework. Most recently, the team completed a pilot of our Hackathon experience, which drew student participants and judges from seven institutions across the U.S. (Hart et al., 2023). Currently, we are fine-tuning processes and curriculum in anticipation of hosting the first cohort of TJC in the 2023-2024 academic year, comprising of more than 70 students from 22 institutions.

4. Applicable Outcomes of the Collaborative's Efforts

The Collaborative's continued efforts refine an innovative, systems-thinking approach to honors education—parallel to one of the TJC's proposed outcomes of preparing students to engage in complex problem-solving. Members harness resources to deliver transformational

experiences nationwide and hope to add international collaborations. Although many factors have contributed to the Collaborative's successes, the commitment and cooperative orientation of the members have been key. Across the group's projects, most are actively involved in design and planning, and leadership roles are intertwined and shifted to accommodate project goals and demands on members' time. Our approach is germane to successful project outcomes, and we believe other colleagues who undertake inter-institutional coalition-building efforts may likewise be able to realize the following positive outcomes.

An Expanded Honors Professional Network

One of the great joys of attending honors-related conferences is the opportunity to meet with colleagues from across disciplines and discuss groundbreaking work at other institutions. Learning about colleagues' best practices often begets collaboration and idea generation. The Collaborative has allowed its members to bring ideas into practice, leading to building professional and student opportunities beyond the scope of our individual scholarship or teaching.

Modeling the Promise of Honors Education

Many honors educators aspire to develop the skills of collaborative, interdisciplinary leadership among their students, often citing these as the learning outcomes of their programs (Chancey et al., 2019). The work of our Collaborative not only led to the development of such a transformative learning experience for students, but also our modelling of the same skills for students at our institutions. By engaging deeply in large, complex issues together, the multidisciplinary members of the Collaborative demonstrate the power of this approach. Should multiple honors colleagues engage in similar, boundary-breaking cross-institutional partnerships, we could realize the collective potential of honors to be at the forefront of creating relevant, novel, and high-impact learning experiences.

5. Conclusions and Future Directions

Our work has led to the dual benefit of establishing a working collaborative and the creation of our novel educational framework where students can practice similar collaborative problem solving through The Justice Challenge.

Our Collaborative represents an opportunity to go beyond "business as usual," reimagining education to harness a key comparative advantage of honors curricula: bringing together multidisciplinary groups of students with multidisciplinary faculty teams to address complex socioeconomic and environmental problems. For students to understand the challenges they will face after graduation, they must learn to work effectively with others who may have different ways of understanding, approaching, describing, and responding to professional and public issues. Such efforts require systems thinking and transdisciplinary capabilities (Appel et al., 2023; Jacobson & Wilensky, 2006; Knox & Heilker, 2023; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), as highlighted in our TJC framework.

The Collaborative has evolved beyond a professional network or community of practice. It has served as an incubator of pedagogical innovations that might be disseminated and strategically infused across undergraduate programs. Extended capacity provided by a collaborative framework allows students to go beyond local or regional boundaries for experiential learning opportunities (Kolb, 2014). Collaborative approaches can help identify and address institutional drivers and barriers to collaborative transdisciplinary teaching (Velez et al., 2022). It is through this Collaborative that we are beginning to realize the full potential for honors education and administration.

Perhaps the most inspiring outcome of our partnership thus far is the formation of The Justice Challenge and our ability to offer students from across the U.S. and beyond exposure to the best pedagogies and best practitioners that honors has to offer. We continue to write our story—and we feel the best is yet to come. Once TJC is well-established nationally, we hope to extend similar opportunities to students on an international scale and to forge partnerships with leaders in honors education on a global platform. Our mission is to prepare future leaders to solve the world’s most wicked problems—grand challenges—through innovative honors pedagogy, all while strengthening our own professional skillsets and commitments to improving global conditions. Additional information can be found at our project website: <https://www.sdstate.edu/grand-challenges-scholars-academy>.

We hope colleagues find value in establishing similar large-scale efforts to partner across institutional and disciplinary boundaries. Our partnerships have yielded knowledge production, professional development, student-centered transformative pedagogies, social change, and friendships. We hope similar collaborations among honors colleagues with challenging goals can yield similar results, all while improving our common human condition. We believe our success as a Collaborative and our field’s success as honors educators is derived from our motto: *simul fortior*—better together.

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