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Note

Opportunities in Disguise: Planned Happenstance in Honors

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1. Motivation and aim

Planned happenstance theory describes how unplanned events can be critical opportunities for personal growth and learning. Current research on incorporating planned happenstance theory within honors programs is limited, but there are many connections between this theory and the unique learning opportunities and career development strategies afforded by honors education.

The authors of this manuscript are honors advisors and instructors who also share experience as honors alumni. This note provides contextual ties to honors education and how planned happenstance theory can present “opportunities in disguise” that are uniquely applicable to honors education through the five skills of planned happenstance theory (curiosity, persistence, flexibility, optimism, and risk taking). The goal of this article is to increase understanding of how planned happenstance theory connects to honors education. This knowledge will better equip honors professionals to facilitate impactful learning and growth for honors students as they navigate new and unforeseen opportunities.

2. Introduction to Planned Happenstance Theory

Although necessary attention is devoted to curricular and academic activities, fostering holistic college student development includes supporting personal and career aspirations. Think back to a time when something seemingly random influenced your career trajectory (e.g., unexpected life event, networking connection, new job offer). Was this incident serendipity or was it the result of your actions? What often seems like a chance event may be the result of past actions. This concept is a core tenant of planned happenstance theory – “a conceptual framework extending career counseling to include the creating and transforming of unplanned events into opportunities for learning” (Mitchell et al., 1999, p. 117). The theory encourages individuals to utilize unexpected events to learn and grow.

Mitchell et al. (1999) outlined tangible steps for how to help students respond to chance events. First, advisors and instructors should normalize planned happenstance theory by helping students become aware of how they have utilized unplanned opportunities in the past. Encouraging students to brainstorm opportunities for growth and exploration related to their careers as a next step provides insight on how they can achieve their goals through tangible actions. Finally, equipping students with the know-how to overcome obstacles they may encounter along the way (e.g., family influences, societal pressures, self-doubt) will ensure their success. Through planned happenstance theory, students can optimize the many opportunities they will be presented with during college.

The basic tenet of planned happenstance theory – making good use of unplanned opportunities – is easy to understand and highly applicable. Planned happenstance theory is especially useful in providing a framework to engage students in the career search and development process. According to the theory, individuals who encounter difficulties in establishing a career path are not indecisive but are considered open-minded for examining all the possible career options (Mitchell et al., 1999; Krumboltz, 2009). While this can create frustration for many college students, planned happenstance theory can bring clarity to those immersed in career exploration. It can encourage students to view current opportunities and circumstances as potential pathways to bring about future opportunities (Mitchell et al., 1999). In other words, this framework can help college students realize how their present reality can have positive impacts on their future careers even if they seem unrelated. With a constantly changing world coupled with future uncertainties, educators should avoid pressuring students into making firm career decisions that do not allow room for exploration (Krumboltz, 2009). In this way, planned happenstance theory can be empowering as it employs an approach to career development focused on the internal locus of control.

In addition to describing the role of chance events, planned happenstance theory also provides concrete suggestions for achieving desirable opportunities. Mitchell et al. (1999) defined five skills that are necessary for fully engaging in planned happenstance theory: curiosity, persistence, flexibility, optimism, and risk taking. Curiosity involves “exploring new learning opportunities” and seeking out innovative experiences; persistence is defined as “exerting effort despite setbacks” and refusing to give up even when immense obstacles threaten to slow forward progress; flexibility is characterized as “changing attitudes and circumstances” or being nimble as the situation necessitates; optimism entails “viewing new opportunities as possible and attainable” while possessing a positive, “glass half-full” mindset; and risk taking is “taking action in the face of uncertain outcomes” and stepping out of a comfort zone in pursuit of growth (p. 118). More detailed descriptions, including methods for how students and professionals may effectively handle and respond to unanticipated opportunities using these skills, will be provided in this article.

While planned happenstance theory originates within the context of career development, it is certainly relevant and applicable to honors programs. As the work of honors is permeable to the entire university, implementing interdisciplinary approaches is best practice (Radasanu et al., 2023). In practice, Kim et al. (2018) demonstrated the broader application of planned happenstance by describing connections between the tenets of planned happenstance and life adjustment, and Valickas et al. (2019) explored how planned happenstance skills

positively contribute to the psychological development of students in environmental mastery, personal growth, and self-acceptance. Furthermore, practitioners have acknowledged how happenstance has tied into historically significant scientific breakthroughs and discoveries (Allchin, 2014). Increasing awareness of the planned happenstance theory among professionals and practitioners has been a focus in the past through professional development workshops (Vo et al., 2021). Additionally, Kim et al. (2014) developed the Planned Happenstance Career Inventory (PHCI) to measure and assess planned happenstance skills on an individual level. Unfortunately, literature that explicitly guides cultivation of the specific skills associated with planned happenstance theory within the context of honors is limited.

Honors is an interdisciplinary community with unique opportunities. As Kotschevar et al. (2018) stated, “Honors education is often marketed as a means to offer enhanced value to a collegiate education” (p. 137). It is important to clarify that enhancing an education does not just mean enriching the academic content of courses. Instead, honors education intends to develop a more competent and well-rounded individual (White, 2019). Honors professionals are uniquely positioned to offer guidance and opportunities to students beyond the foundational academic support they receive within their majors. Advisors and educators should provide students with tools to continue their vocational development and discovery even after graduation (Hause, 2017), and helping students develop the skills associated with the planned happenstance framework can achieve this. This note demonstrates how the core skills of planned happenstance theory can specifically be developed and enhanced through honors.

3. Curiosity in honors

In the context of planned happenstance theory, curiosity is associated with new opportunities for growth (Mitchell et al., 1999). According to Hause (2017), academic professionals should not tell students how to live their lives; instead, their role is to help students develop skills to make decisions for themselves. One way to do this is by helping students cultivate curiosity. Honors colleges and programs provide students opportunities to learn with and from an interdisciplinary community who have a vast array of interests. Interdisciplinary inquiry can be driven by curiosity and often catalyzes discovery-based learning through interpersonal discussion (King Taylor et al., 2022). Fostering curiosity in students can motivate them to explore new opportunities they would not otherwise have considered.

Deeg et al. (2024) found that honors students are motivated by instrumental, personal, and relational factors. Fostering a mindset of curiosity helps bridge student motivations with opportunities to develop new ways of thinking and imagine new possibilities. Encouraging inquisition is essential for cultivating and facilitating curiosity in students, especially in environments where asking critical questions can be intimidating. Courses such as honors colloquia encourage students to cross-examine familiar subjects in new, creative ways. These interdisciplinary, topic-based courses also connect students and faculty over shared interests (Deeg et al., 2024). Honors courses provide students with an environment where they can invest in these experiences to develop curiosity.

Some students believe the purpose of an undergraduate degree is solely to prepare them for a professional livelihood. Students can become fixated on pursuing a specific experience or earning a certain degree that they believe will get them into their chosen career or graduate program. This undermines the larger, more urgent purpose for honors education to develop lifelong learners and leaders. Hause (2017) found that “advising with an eye to vocation should not rule out adventure, serendipity, or even whim in the selection of courses or extracurricular activities” (p. 160). Students should be reminded of the value of curiosity and exploring ideas and opportunities that may not be in the confined scope of their original plan. In the context of advising students, this could include encouraging them to seek out interest-based academic or extracurricular opportunities they had not previously considered.

Curiosity-based interactions and discussions can help students develop intercultural competence and effective communication that will benefit them in vocational settings (King Taylor et al., 2022). Within honors at South Dakota State University, students are encouraged to participate in extracurricular programs such as “First Year Fellowship” and “Explore Brookings” that allow them to learn more about their fellow students and the community. With open minds, students learn how to explore beyond the classroom from these experiences.

4. Persistence in honors

Persistence refers to the ability to exert effort despite setbacks, i.e., the mantra, “When at first you don’t succeed, try, try again” (Mitchell et al., 1999). Persistence can fuel motivation, but it can also bring setbacks and discouragement. As applied to collegiate learning, the pursuit of credentialed knowledge and skills can be exciting, but this requires long-term commitment through unanticipated turns that can derail students’ feelings of self-worth and ability, especially for students whose career aspirations are their primary motivations for learning. Discernment about how and when to persist is an ongoing but necessary process for students to be satisfied with the outcomes they create (Hause, 2017). Encouraging persistence can help students develop a locus of control and realize they have ownership over their actions and achievements.

As high caliber in nature, honors students are generally drawn to well-defined learning pathways with predictable outcomes, but they are not always prepared for failure or handling significant alteration to their pre-determined plans. Over-dependence on planning can make unanticipated change and setbacks seem overwhelmingly detrimental and create reactive responses. Providing honors students with a practical understanding of planned happenstance theory can equip them to constructively plan for and react to incidences of happenstance. Helping students realize that setbacks are part of the learning process can help them learn how to leverage obstacles to improve desired outcomes. In this regard, persistence is a critical skill for helping honors students cope with unforeseen events with efficiency and success.

Research is driven by discovery-based learning, and many honors programs have a capstone project that requires students to engage in scholarly pursuits such as research or creative activity. Unplanned incidences en route of long-term, complex project goals (e.g., research, capstones) may be hugely influential to the project’s planned trajectory and outcomes. It is important to note that reaching an unexpected outcome does not indicate failure.

Persistence through challenges, making necessary adjustments, and managing unexpected outcomes creates opportunities to teach and practice critical thinking skills and lean into happenstance rather than deflect it. In this regard, it is critical that students learn how to adapt and persist through unforeseen events. Investing in planned happenstance theory can help honors students develop their ability to succeed in discovery-based learning and persist through unplanned challenges with commitment to excellence, unwavering investment, and enhanced reward.

5. Flexibility in honors

Flexibility is a key element for achieving success. Mitchell et al. (1999) defined flexibility as adapting actions to suit the circumstances. Honors advisors and instructors promote flexibility by offering new ideas and possibilities unique to students' interests as circumstances change and new opportunities arise. As Hause (2017) stated, "In a trusting, attentive advising relationship, an advisor can help students understand more accurately who they are, including what they value and what they care about, and thereby discern more effectively what their careers and vocations should be" (p. 156). In these regards, honors professionals are uniquely positioned to help students adapt to changing circumstances and identify new ways to achieve their goals.

Flexibility is often challenged by predefined, universal operations suggesting there are single, correct answers to questions. Too often students find themselves "believing they are expected to discover the right answer rather than their own answer" (White, 2019, p. 28). Diverting from an original plan can be uncomfortable for those who have high expectations about curriculum and learning regimen (White, 2019). Educators must balance mirroring flexibility to students while streamlining student coursework to meet anticipated graduation timelines. Showing students the value of flexibility and how to leverage it can help them discover their own "right" answer. In this way, teaching flexibility to honors students can help them understand the value of metacognitive reflection, who they are as unique individuals, and their contributions to society.

Honors encourages flexibility through creating individualized experiences for students who are motivated to pursue unique learning opportunities. Honors colleges offer many pathways to achieve honors distinction which allows students from all majors to learn and apply flexibility in their educational pursuits. For example, a new Applied Thinking and Innovation minor and updated curricula are now offered by the Van D. and Barbara B. Fishback Honors College at South Dakota State University to reflect shifting student demographics. This aligns with the approach taken by Budowle et al. (2023) for creating an honors minor to provide students more transdisciplinary experiences to complement their discipline-based courses. In these ways, honors encourages students to invest in their interests, embrace instances of planned happenstance, and consider what is most important for them to achieve their goals.

6. Optimism in honors

Optimism as defined by Mitchell et al. (1999) involves helping students maintain a positive, can-do attitude. Honors students often hold themselves to high standards and can be inclined toward perfectionism (Budowle et al., 2023). As such, honors professionals often must help students maintain positivity amidst difficult personal or academic situations. According to Hause (2017), students are encouraged when they feel their pursuits will

benefit themselves and their communities. Honors advisors and instructors should empower students to realize their impacts, and in this way, honors professionals can serve as advocates for students by imparting a spirit of optimism and hope they can reciprocate to others.

Helping students develop a growth mindset is another way to encourage optimism. Possessing a growth mindset helps students see their abilities can evolve over time with effort and dedication (Dweck, 1999). This frame of mind can be promoted through communication. For example, Canning et al. (2024) found that an instructor who sent growth mindset-oriented emails through the semester saw their students perform better than those who received a standard message. Honors professionals can provide the support and optimism students need when encountering obstacles or setbacks as they pursue their goals.

Goal setting in higher education is important. In a study by 't Mannetje et al. (2021), all student participants identified "self-directiveness" or a sense of purpose and goal orientation as an important personal resource for succeeding in education. Helping students remain confident and enthusiastic about achieving their goals is equally important. One way to accomplish this is through concept mapping exercises. Johnson et al. (2013) found concept mapping to be a valuable tool in a first-year honors course because it helped to scaffold the steps for involvement and organized opportunities in a way students could understand. This and other resources can help honors students feel prepared to face the uncertainties of life with an attitude of hope and positivity.

7. Risk taking in honors

The final skill discussed in planned happenstance theory is risk taking. When students are encouraged to take risks, they are invited to step outside their comfort zone and embrace uncertainty (Mitchell et al., 1999). Risk taking embraces unpredictability within reason. Honors students accept some risk by pursuing a more challenging course of study, though this is a comfortable risk for most and aligns with their past success in academics. Students are afraid of failure (White, 2019), but honors offers opportunities for encouraging students to take risks and learn from failure in a safe and supportive environment.

Honors colleges and programs provide many opportunities for students to participate in high-impact experiences that facilitate guided risk taking. For example, study abroad experiences are commonly offered through honors, during which students demonstrate courage that can be applied to other academic and extracurricular pursuits (Baigent, 2019). Students who successfully manage the challenges of studying abroad develop skills to navigate new and uncertain situations, which can lead to more informed and effective risk taking in other ventures.

Research and creative activities offer additional opportunities for honors students to embrace and work through risks associated with unpredictability. As previously mentioned, many honors programs require students to complete a capstone project that involves engaging in original research or creative work. These activities are fluid and often involve setbacks and failures. When students take risks and encounter failure in these scholarly endeavors, they learn critical reasoning (King Taylor et al., 2022). The predictable nature of unpredictability can help students gain confidence and control over their learning process.

Creating success from risk in an academic environment can encourage students to apply informed risk taking to their personal and professional pursuits.

8. Conclusion

Planned happenstance theory is an approachable way to introduce career development concepts to honors faculty, staff, and students. Honors professionals can incorporate planned happenstance theory into interactions with students by encouraging them to be open to the many spontaneous opportunities life presents. Providing practical guidance for how individuals can create serendipitous events through cultivating curiosity, persistence, flexibility, optimism, and risk taking can help safeguard success (Mitchell et al., 1999).

Planned happenstance theory in the context of honors education can be applied to experiences, relationships, projects, experiential learning, leadership, and many other activities. Possible future directions for work in this area could include studying the implementation of planned happenstance theory and skill building in different disciplines, utilizing tools such as the Planned Happenstance Career Inventory with honors students, and establishing a formal curricular model for incorporating planned happenstance theory into honors education.

Helping students recognize and develop skills associated with planned happenstance theory equips them for lifelong learning and growth. With this framework, faculty and staff can design and implement innovative approaches to enrich the honors student experience.

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