Revolutionizing Honors: A Model for Transformation and Success

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Abstract

Utilizing a strength-based model, the Honors Living-Learning Community (HLLC) at Rutgers University - Newark is an initiative that challenges dominant ideologies related to merit, and interrogates the structural forces and institutional practices that contribute to the underrepresentation of Latinx/a/o students in honors programs. This chapter explores how the HLLC transformed the ways academic potential and intellect are identified, and utilizes culturally responsive pedagogy and practice to support the intellectual, ethical, and psychosocial development of Latinx/a/o students are often viewed through a deficit lens.

**Keywords:** Merit, Honors Programs, Strength-based Model, Racial Microaggressions, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
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In the United States, higher education is perceived as the great equalizer (Dougherty, 1994, Kerckhof, 1995; Knottnerus, 1987; Sewell & Hauser, 1972; Torche 2011, Benedict & McClough, 2010). There are staggering numbers of talented, critically-minded, and academically promising young people who are experiencing real structural barriers to higher education (Solorzano, D., Villalpando, O., & Oseguera, L. 2005). While Latinas/os represent the largest racial/ethnic group in the U.S., they also have the lowest educational transition rates from elementary to advanced degrees in comparison to Whites, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans (Solarzano et al., 2005). As Solarzano et al. (2005) contends, “This lack of achievement and attainment . . . has resulted in both a loss of talent to U.S. society and a loss of important role models for the next generation of Latina/o students” (p. 277). These structural inequities have devastating implications for Latinx/a/o communities.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides an important framework for understanding the ways in which racism has created real barriers to access and success for Latinx/a/o students (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Taylor, 1999; Villalpando, 2003; Villalpando & Delgado Bernal, 2002; Yosso, 2000). Within the field of higher education, “CRT . . . explores the ways in which “race-neutral” laws and institutional structures, practices, and policies
perpetuate racial/ethnic educational inequality” (Solorzano et al., p. 274). This theoretical framework provides a nuanced critique of how structural racism operates within higher education and a roadmap for high-impact initiatives that seek to eradicate these inequities.

The Honors Living-Learning Community (HLLC) at Rutgers University-Newark (RU-N), envisioned by Shirley M. Collado Ph.D., former executive vice chancellor and chief operating officer of RU-N and the 9th president of Ithaca College, aims to address educational inequities by fostering the holistic development of talented students that desire to contribute positively to society. Similar to other U.S. urban centers, educational and racial/ethnic inequities are undeniable in Newark, NJ. In 2010, Newark had the largest number of Latino (93,746) and Black (145,085) residents of any municipality in New Jersey. In 2016, of all Newark Public School students, 44% were Hispanic and 47% were Black (District Information - Newark Public Schools). Districtwide, 73.47% of Newark high school students graduated as compared to the 90% of graduates statewide (2011-2015 American Community Survey). Furthermore, in 2015, only 16% of Newark residents who were 25 years of age or older had attained a bachelor’s degree or higher, in comparison to the statewide average of 38% (2011-2015 American Community Survey). Within this context, only 10% of those who identified as Latino or Hispanic had attained a bachelor’s degree (2011-2015 American Community Survey).

At the HLLC, administrators and faculty are committed to removing structural
barriers that inhibit low-income Latinx/o/a and Black students in Newark, NJ from pursuing higher education. The HLLC utilizes a multi-layered admissions process focused on measuring academic potential, resiliency, and multiple intelligences to identify students who may be missed when traditional metrics (i.e., grades, SAT scores) are used to determine academic success (Guinier, 2015; Miller, 2005). Furthermore, the HLLC employs various best practices including intensive strength based academic advisement, residential living-learning communities, intergenerational mentoring, and culturally relevant pedagogy to support students in the HLLC at Rutgers University-Newark (RU-N). Research focused on student success in college, specifically for those from underrepresented communities, highlights the importance of wrap-around services including strong and seamless relationships between faculty, student services, and community to support the emotional, developmental, and academic success of students. (Williamson, L. V., Goosen, R. A., & Gonzalez Jr., G. F. 2014)

The HLLC’s commitment grounded in a belief that admitting these students will not only enhance their lives, but will enrich the educational environment at RU-N, and benefit the local, national, and global community. In *The Tyranny of Meritocracy*, Lani Guinier (2015) elaborates on the invaluable perspectives that diverse students add to both our classrooms and our democracy. She asserts, “True diversity that brings together a group of individuals more representative of the world we live in can help all of us rethink tasks, synthesize information better, and innovate creative ways to solve problems” (p.
Arguably, there is no one better equipped to help solve both local and global problems than students who may have experienced the impact of these issues first hand. As a result of their life experiences, these students offer keen insights that make them indispensable assets to college campus and to their fields of study.

The HLLC capitalizes on student’s assets by providing them with opportunities and resources to become leaders in their fields of study, collaborators in their communities, and change agents in our world. This is consistent with Guinier’s (2015) argument to re-conceptualize merit within higher education:

... if our society truly values education as a means of preparing citizens to participate in the decisions that affect their lives as individuals and the society they create as a collective, as well as to enable individuals to improve their lots and their society, then we need to reexamine exactly how we define “merit” (p. X)

Ultimately, Guinier’s conceptualization of merit as an individual’s ability to optimally contribute to our democracy is consistent with the HLLC’s mission to cultivate students who will be change makers in their communities and in our world. Given the structural inequities plaguing Latinx/a/o communities nationally, Latinx/a/o students are in a unique position to provide innovative and culturally-grounded solutions to ameliorate some of these issues. Yosso (2005) contends that People of Color have accumulated unique resources in the form community cultural wealth or “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and
resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p.77), which can increase their success in college, but will also allow them to optimally contribute to the public good (Pérez II, D. (2016), Rendon, L. I., Nora, A., & Kanagala, V. (2014).

Research shows us that educational ideologies based upon deficit models can be equally harmful to the self-esteem, psychological well-being, and academic potential of those who are disenfranchised by systems of inequity. (Irizarry, 2009); Pérez, Ashlee, Karikari, Do, & Sim, in press); Valencia, 1997, 2010). More specifically, Ford’s (2014) research elucidates how deficit paradigms contribute to the underrepresentation of Black and Hispanic students in gifted programs. She asserts, “Too many African American and Hispanic students do not achieve to their potential because they are stifled by society’s deeply ingrained bias of equating Whites and whiteness with superiority” (p. 150). This dynamic limits opportunities for Latinx/a/o student’s to high-quality educational experiences available in honors programs.

The HLLC at RU-N seeks to eradicate structural barriers while critiquing deficit based ideologies, which fail to recognize the talent, academic potential, and intellectual abilities of students from under-resourced communities. Utilizing a strength-based model, the HLLC was implemented under the leadership of Chancellor Nancy Cantor, who is nationally recognized for her scholarship focused on the role of universities as anchor institutions within the communities. According to Chancellor Cantor, the RU-N’s mission centers on “not just being in Newark, but of Newark.” This partnership with the
Newark community includes interdependence, sharing of resources, and prioritizing work and scholarship that is mutually beneficial, and focused on the public good. (Cantor, 2017).

Part of realizing this vision is increasing access to higher education for Newark residents. To this end, the HLLC has broadened the ways that academic potential and intellect are identified, and utilizes culturally relevant pedagogy and practices to create infrastructures that best support the intellectual, ethical, and psychosocial development of students who have viewed through a deficit lens. Strength-based perspectives assume that every individual has resources that can be mobilized toward success in many areas of life (Anderson, 2000; Saleebey, 2001). More specifically, this approach is characterized by “efforts to label what is right” within people and organizations (Buckingham, 2007, p. 6). The HLLC has adopted a strength based model for identifying and cultivating academic talent and potential.

Background

The HLLC disrupts narratives rooted in racist, classist, and deficit-based ideologies that create and maintain barriers to student success. These barriers often materialize as microaggressions that undermine the success of Latina/o college students (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and
Racial microaggressions diminish the emotional well-being and academic success of students who have a collective history of marginalization and disenfranchisement within the academy (Sue et al., 2007). Furthermore, Yosso et al.’s (2009) research on Latina/o students revealed how microaggressions in the form of interpersonal, institutional, and racial jokes can be detrimental to students’ success. These ongoing verbal and psychological assaults influence students’ level of self-efficacy and perception of themselves as scholars and leaders within their disciplines. Studies indicate that ideologies related to the intellectual inferiority of Black and Latinx students permeates even the most progressive environments, those in which white people often perceive themselves to be free of bias, and can be invisible to students of color who internalize these messages (Perez et al., in press; Sue et al., 2007; Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2009).

**Strength Based Approaches to Latinx Student Success**

Researchers have highlighted several best practices in supporting the success of Latinx/a/o students such as high touch mentoring, wrap around services, intensive academic advising, culturally specific communities of support, and curricular models (Swail, 2004, Yosso et al., 2009, Solarzano et al., 2005, Oseguera, L., Locks, A. M., & Vega, I. I. (2009), Museus, S. D. (2014), Museus, S. D., & Smith, E. J. (2016), Museus,
Furthermore, the positive psychology movement and strength based approaches to student success, including attribution theory and appreciative inquiry, have focused heavily on helping students to identify their own internal resources as opposed to focusing on their deficits (Demetriou, & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Pèrez & Sáenz, 2017; Schreiner, 2010). This research can be used to inform our practice, and inspire innovative approaches to student success for those who have been racially and economically disenfranchised. By operationalizing best practices and innovative approaches grounded in research focused on what Paris (2012) characterized as resource pedagogies or “approaches to teaching and learning [that] draw upon the cultural resources and strengths of students,” (p. 1) the HLLC advances strength-based praxis within higher education.

**The HLLC is Re-defining Honors**

The HLLC is redefining the notion of “merit” by creating diverse intergenerational and interdisciplinary learning communities that cultivate Latinx/a/o students’ academic talent and potential to effect positive social change in Newark, NJ. The HLLC’s learning communities are comprised of students, faculty, and community partners engaged in rigorous scholarship focused on addressing our nation’s most pressing social issues including, but not limited to poverty, xenophobia, racism, sexism and heterosexism, as well as climate change.

The HLLC was purposefully designed to help students thrive at RU-N. Our
admissions processes and retention practices are culturally-specific and responsive to the educational needs of students who have been disenfranchised by systems of inequity in education. In designing the HLLC, faculty and staff reflected on several questions: What would it mean to truly value and recognize the assets that Latinx/a/o and other HLLC scholars bring to our college campus? How might we center their experiences within the curriculum? What infrastructures are needed to create a model for student success that identifies and cultivates their unique strengths, talents, and skill sets?

Approximately two-thirds of the soon to be 400 HLLC scholars are greater Newark residents who demonstrate potential to succeed academically, think critically, and become positive change agents on campus and in the community. HLLC scholars are selected to join a diverse living-learning community focused on cultivating knowledge, fostering understanding across and within groups, and activating social, institutional, and cultural change. The demographic trends within the HLLC are significant given their stark contrast from traditional honors communities, which admit students primarily based on test scores and grades.

Approximately 80% of HLLC students identify as Black or Latinx/a/o. Over 65% of these students are eligible for Pell Grants and almost 50% are first-generation college students. Traditionally, honors colleges disproportionately admit students who identify as White and come from the upper socio-economic quartiles (Ford, 2014; Pittman, 2001). Ford (2014) documented racial segregation that exists within gifted and honors programs
at the secondary level. “There is no denying that gifted education classes and services are disproportionately represented by and serving White, higher-income, and privileged students, and gifted education gives them a boost up the social and fiscal hierarchy” (p. 149). Demographic trends in Advanced Placement courses and “gifted programs” have a direct correlation to college honors (Quinton, December 2014). As a result of these structural barriers, the HLLC is utilizing alternative metrics to assess students’ academic potential.

**Identifying Alternatives to the SAT**

We recognize that the SAT is not an adequate assessment tool for measuring the unique skills, knowledge, or multiple intelligences necessary to be successful in college or to optimally contribute to society. Researchers consistently highlight racial and economic biases inherent in standardized testing and how this negatively impacts admissions rates among low-income students of color (Miller, 2005; Solorzano 2010; Astin, 1982, 1993; Oseguera, 2004). As it pertains to Latina/os, Solorzano (2010) attributes the disproportionate representation of Latinas/os in two-year versus four-year institutions to the use of standardized testing.

SAT scores do not assess a student’s ability to critically analyze social inequities or use innovative methods for addressing these issues. These scores do not assess the skills necessary to have difficult dialogues about identity and community in diverse settings. Finally, standardized tests will not allow us to assess a student’s orientation
towards failure and his/her/their unique ability to exhibit the resiliency necessary to navigate challenges within a college environment. Guinier (2015) expands on the dangers of relying exclusively on the SAT in college admissions process:

. . . when we redefine merit by those characteristics that indicate a student’s potential for future success in our democracy—leadership, the ability to collaborate with others, resiliency, and a drive to learn, among others—then we might be able to make use of actions that prioritize such traits. If we commit to mentoring and nurturing that potential in our students, universities might more successfully cultivate potential leaders. (p. 20)

Given the HLLC’s distinctive mission and focus on social change and community engagement, expanding our admissions rubric to measure traits like leadership and resiliency are imperative. The HLLC has designed a comprehensive rubric that measures student characteristics including critical thinking skills, social and emotional intelligence, leadership skills, academic potential, artistic and intellectual abilities, resiliency, passion for social change, and the ability to dialogue across difference. The metrics utilized to measure these attributes center the experiential realities of students whose social identities and life experiences position them to contribute innovative perspectives to local issues.

Each year, the HLLC engages approximately 900 students in a series of interactive activities to assess their abilities. This holistic admissions process includes
large group interviews, individual interviews, holistic assessment of transcripts, and essays focused on students’ passions related to social issues. The large group interview process requires students to operate in teams and engage in group simulations focused on conceptualizing community development plans, and allocating resources based on community needs. This process allows faculty and staff to assess students’ orientation towards social justice, ability to operate in a group, leadership abilities, and critical thinking skills.

The individual interview process focuses heavily on understanding students’ life experiences, and identifying individual strengths, levels of resiliency, coping skills, resourcefulness, values, and passions. These attributes are assessed through a series of behavioral questions that allow students to share stories and articulate how these concepts have emerged in their lives. More specifically, consistent with Attribution Theory (Demetriou, C. & Schmitz-Sciborski, A. 2011), there is a focus on understanding how students make meaning of their failures and successes. The HLLC desires students who can adapt to failure and not give up, and those who have an internal locus of control. Students who have adopted a belief system characterized by having some level of control over the outcomes of their lives, and have a deep sense of purpose or responsibility that allows them to persevere through obstacles, will be more successful in college (Demetriou, C. & Schmitz-Sciborski, A. 2011). Furthermore, Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Theory, a strength based framework for understanding the
unique cultural assets and resiliency that students who have been disenfranchised by systems of inequity bring to a college environment, supports how these attributes foster success within college.

Each year, the HLLC admits 90 first-year and transfer students into this RU-N community. The purposeful inclusion of transfer students from local community colleges in our pool fulfills two priorities—increasing college access for under-resourced students and creating of intergenerational learning communities. Research related to the benefits of intergenerational learning communities highlights the value for both older and younger students in the co-creation of knowledge (Marquez Kiyama & Luca, 2014; Pstross, Corrigan, Knopf, 2017). Most Latina/o students’ initial exposure to college is through the community college system (Solarzano et al., 2010). However, holistically identifying and admitting students is just the beginning. The HLLC utilizes culturally specific pedagogy and practice to create infrastructures that best support the intellectual, ethical, and psychosocial development of students.

The HLLC Curriculum

The HLLC builds on students’ knowledge and lived experiences, increases cultural competency, and teaches students to approach local challenges from historical, philosophical, and comparative perspectives. Consistent with Ladson-Billings (1995), instituting a culturally relevant pedagogy to “produce students who can achieve academically . . . demonstrate cultural competence, and...who can both understand and
critique the existing social order” (p. 474). The HLLC curriculum provides students with a framework to explore social inequities and themes related to citizenship as they emerge within various academic disciplines. All students take 18 credits of HLLC courses that are interdisciplinary in nature, co-instructed by faculty and community leaders from various sectors, and explore themes related to local citizenship in a global world. Courses offered in the 2016-17 academic year focused on a variety of topics ranging from juvenile justice, to illustrating Newark’s oral histories through the arts, to critiquing images of crime in the media.

High academic expectations of students are at the core of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). One of the HLLC’s core courses, HLLC 303: Local Citizenship within a Global World, is a writing intensive course focused on the historical and contemporary role that local citizens have played in fostering social change in Newark, NJ and beyond. By design, the 300-level course combined students with various academic experiences and levels of preparedness, and set high expectations for academic rigor, critical thinking, and intensive reading and writing, while providing high levels of individualized academic support for those in need.

The HLLC curriculum focuses on creating learning communities of scholars, activists, community members, and students engaged in critical discourse about some of the world’s most pressing social issues. Many of the faculty are engaged in public scholarship to improve the lives of underserved communities. This central pedagogical
approach is reflected in bell hooks’ (2002) concept of critical thinking as transformation. She explained this concept as follows:

I think thinking critically is at the heart of anybody transforming their life ...In a certain kind of patronizing way education just says, all these people need is tools for survival, basic survival tools, like their degree so they can get a job and not, in fact, that we enhance their lives in the same way we've enhanced our lives by engaging in a certain kind of critical process. (hooks, as cited in Patierno, & Hirshorn, 2002, p. 3)

Faculty and staff strive to engage students in experiences that help them critically reflect on what it means to be an agent of change in their families, communities, and the world.

**Intergenerational Mentoring & Cohort Model**

The HLLC has built a retention infrastructure based on national best practices to support HLLC students from admission through graduation. Students of color are more likely to stay in school and graduate when they develop strong social ties and are integrated into smaller cultural communities. (Marquez Kiyama & Luca, 2014; Solórzano, 1999; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). The HLLC is comprised of multiple learning communities and utilizes a cohort model. In addition to smaller intergenerational learning communities that are centered around the curriculum, students live together in residence and are assigned to cohorts of ten students creating social support systems that are critical during the first two years when students are most likely
to drop out of college. HLLC cohorts meet bi-weekly with peer mentors who are older HLLC scholars trained and supported to facilitate cohort meetings focused on acclimating to the RU-N community, gaining awareness of campus resources, and providing a safe space for HLLC scholars to process their collegiate experiences. Peer mentoring and encouraging intergenerational support systems are powerful tools for community building, retention, and student success.

In addition to the cohort model, all HLLC scholars meet bi-weekly with a faculty mentor during the first two years of college. We purposefully select mentors who are comfortable engaging our diverse student populations. Faculty mentors provide holistic support to HLLC scholars to address personal, academic, and social matters. Faculty mentors are supported by HLLC deans via bi-weekly group meetings where they receive guidance, and work collaboratively to connect students with resources on campus including learning centers, counseling services, financial aid, and crisis intervention. Additionally, the HLLC provides academic advisors and deans who offer individualized advising to students based on their level of academic preparedness and academic major.

Implications for Practice

The HLLC offers an innovative model for designing honors programs that accurately reflect the demographics of our nation and prepare future leaders to address social inequity on multiple levels. The first relates to shifting how academic potential, abilities, and intellect are measured by utilizing a more holistic admissions process.
The second, and perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of our work focuses on cultivating Latinx/a/o student talent, particularly when students have internalized deficit-based ideologies related to intelligence and worth. The HLLC challenges faculty and staff to critically reflect on the cultural norms and assumptions that undergird the culture of our institution (Perez et al. in press; Valencia, 2010), and examine what it would mean to truly shift our structures, policies, and culture to be inclusive and supportive of all students. Central to this concept is culturally relevant pedagogy that centers the experiences of Latinx/a/o students and frames teaching and learning through that lens (Museus & Jayakumar, 2012). Our curriculum focuses on community engaged scholarship and examines what it means to be active citizens and positive change agents in the world.

Third is the importance of intergenerational mentoring in supporting the success of Latinx/a/o students, both through individualized support from faculty and staff mentors, and through cohort based peer mentoring. This multi-layered support system helps students to acclimate to the campus environment and aids in their psycho-social development. For Latinx/a/o students in particular, culturally based support systems and strong community ties are integral to their success on campus (Swail, 2004, Yosso et al., 2009, Solarzano et al., 2005, Oseguera, L., Locks, A. M., & Vega, I. I. (2009), Museus, S. D. (2014), Museus, S. D., & Smith, E. J. (2016), Museus, S. D., & Jayakumar, U. M. (2012). Residential living learning communities and shared interdisciplinary learning
communities aid in this support.

Lastly, the HLLC has prioritized the positioning Latinx faculty and staff in leadership throughout the organization. For far too long, students marginalized by systems of inequity have been forced to the sidelines while their identities, needs, and potential for success were defined by others. The lack of role models in leadership positions that reflect Latinx/a/o students, the undervaluing of their intellectual abilities or potential, and the centering of Eurocentric hetero-patriarchal histories, values, and experiences are nothing less than alienating. Latinx/a/o students need to see themselves reflected at the highest levels so that they may aspire to reach their fullest potential.

Conclusion

Established in 2015, the HLLC has served as an incubator for innovation on issues of access, equity, inclusion, and pedagogy at RU-N. Through this initiative, we have been able to creatively engage students, faculty, and staff to increase access to higher education for Latinx/a/o students, cultivate their academic potential and leadership abilities through culturally relevant and publicly engaged pedagogical practices, and utilize best practices for retention and student success.
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