

Research on Honors Composition, 2004–2015

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The spring/summer 2004 issue of the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC)* was devoted exclusively to research in honors education. The issue was divided into three sections: the introductory Forum on Research in Honors, which revisited three essays published in *Forum for Honors* in 1984 and included two 2004 responses; Research in Honors; and Research about Honors. After I had revised my dissertation for the 2003 NCHC monograph *Honors Composition: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Practices*, I incorporated some of my unused dissertation material for two pieces in the issue, one being a response essay in the Forum, “Research in Honors and Composition,” and the other an article in the Research in Honors section, “Faculty Compensation and Course Assessment in Honors Composition,” using material that my dissertation director thought was too political to survive the dissertation defense.

A little over a decade later, as NCHC celebrates its fiftieth anniversary, *JNCHC* is contemplating the future of research in, on, and about honors. In his lead essay, “An Agenda for the Future of Research,” George Mariz compares the disciplinary research he conducts in European history to research in

honors, which he argues “is another species altogether: it has more nebulous standards of worthiness, and there are no archives, bodies of scientific knowledge, established procedures, or information-rich data sets.” To that end, I wish to create an *ad hoc* bibliography for the purposes of archiving qualitative and quantitative research on honors composition to date, providing a context for interdisciplinary work in honors composition with sources from both honors education and composition studies, and initiating directions for future research using multiple methodologies in each field.

The three main areas of inquiry for honors composition during the past decade have been programmatic issues, pedagogical approaches, and student performance. I focus on programmatic issues, advocating for the vital role that honors composition plays within honors programs and colleges by aiding students with the transition from high school writing to college-level research, which in turn increases program retention rates, particularly with the expanding CUR-based emphasis on honors theses and capstone projects. Other researchers have explored pedagogy and performance, such as Jaime Lynn Longo’s 2008 dissertation, *Forging Connections: Development of Academic Argument in First Year Honors Students’ Writing*. As a doctoral candidate in English at Temple University, Longo conducted “ethnographic observation, case study interviews, and a code-driven analysis of student writing” to determine whether honors students were “constructing effective academic arguments after a year spent in the program”:

This study demonstrates that, by the end of their first year, most Honors students in this program have begun to construct effective, and sometimes even exceptional, academic arguments. . . . Moreover, my research findings suggest that Honors students are not fundamentally more capable of creating academic arguments than general university students; rather, programmatic and professorial writing expectations, as demonstrated through in-class instruction, type and scope of assignments given, feedback given in conferences and on papers, and learning community participation, challenge Honors students and spur their development as writers in ways that the general university population does not experience. (v)

Longo has codified what honors compositionists have long reported anecdotally: honors students are not necessarily better writers than general students but improve as writers at a faster pace through challenging instruction in honors composition courses. The complete study is available through

dissertation databases, but Longo took an administrative position as Director of Academic Support Programs at LaSalle University and therefore did not pursue publication of the dissertation, nor did she continue research on honors composition. Nevertheless, honors educators looking to argue the value of requiring honors students to take first-year honors composition courses in the face of increasing AP and dual enrollment credits should seek out and include Longo's findings in their literature reviews. The fact that Longo's work has not been formally published, however, points to the two-fold problem that (1) research on honors composition may not find its way to publication in an appropriate venue and (2) studies that have achieved publication are few and far between.

In the bibliography below, I have compiled for future honors composition researchers a comprehensive list of honors composition publications and disciplinary presentations to date. Recently, I had the opportunity to read a paper in which the author claimed that he could find "scant research" on honors composition and subsequently failed to list any of the existing works from either composition studies or honors education. My intent here, therefore, is to provide a starting place for future researchers to begin their literature reviews and to decide which research agenda to pursue. Because I focused on postsecondary education, I have not included works on K–12 gifted and honors students. To facilitate readability, I have categorized items by publication type, listed them in chronological order, and provided commentary on each venue rather than annotations on individual entries. Any unintentional omissions or oversights are mine alone. Complete MLA bibliographic citations are provided at the end of the article.

JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL COLLEGIATE HONORS COUNCIL

JNCHC is the premier scholarly research journal for postsecondary honors education. According to its editorial policy, "Articles may include analyses of trends in teaching methodology, articles on interdisciplinary efforts, discussions of problems common to honors programs, items on the national higher education agenda, and presentations of emergent issues relevant to honors education." *JNCHC* is an important venue for publications on honors composition because developing students' skills in critical thinking, argumentation, and written research affects student performance not just in the English classroom but throughout major coursework and in key components of honors education such as CUR-based projects, experiential learning programs, and thesis and capstone requirements.

- 5.1 (2004): Annmarie Guzy, “Research in Honors and Composition.”
- 5.1 (2004): Annmarie Guzy, “Faculty Compensation and Course Assessment in Honors Composition.”
- 8.1 (2007): Annmarie Guzy, “Evaluation vs. Grading in Honors Composition Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying about Grades and Love Teaching.”
- 15.2 (2014): Heather C. Camp, “Generative Intersections: Supporting Honors through College Composition.”
- 15.2 (2014): Annmarie Guzy, “An Effective Honors Composition Class Improves Honors Retention Rates: Outcomes and Statistical Prestidigitation.”
- 16.1 (2015): Annmarie Guzy, “Honors Composition: Humanity beyond the Humanities.”

HONORS IN PRACTICE

HIP is the annual “nuts and bolts” publication for innovative practices in postsecondary honors educators and is an appropriate venue for essays about hands-on practices in the honors composition classroom. Such articles are of interest not only to honors compositionists but also to honors professionals in other disciplines who are engaged in writing across the honors curriculum and to honors administrators who would like to measure how honors writing instruction can increase student publications, presentations, and retention/graduation rates.

- 3 (2007): Ann T. Parker, “Service Learning in the Honors Composition Classroom: What Difference Does It Make?”
- 7 (2011): Annmarie Guzy, “Why Honors Students Still Need First-Year Composition.”

NCHC MONOGRAPH CHAPTERS

The NCHC Monograph Series includes foundational book-length works and anthologies on various topics in postsecondary honors education. In addition to the *Honors Composition* monograph, chapters on honors composition have been included in other entries.

Teaching and Learning in Honors (2000): Stewart Justman, “Honors Composition: Thoughts on Pedagogy.”

Setting the Table for Diversity (2010): Lisa Coleman, “Psyche as Text: Diversity Issues and First-Year Honors Composition.”

CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION (CCCC)

No major scholarly journal in composition studies, including *College Composition and Communication*, *Journal of Advanced Composition*, and *Research in the Teaching of English*, has published an article on honors composition. One overriding reason is the Marxist foundation of the discipline’s inescapable “English teacher as savior” narrative, beginning with the English language publication of Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970: the English teacher will fight the oppressive banking method of education by teaching underserved students how to think, speak, and write critically and thus how to question authority and overcome traditional socioeconomic barriers. Canonical works on basic and remedial writing that reinforce this narrative include *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* by Mina Shaughnessy, after whom the MLA named its Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize for “an outstanding scholarly book in the fields of language, culture, literacy, and literature that has a strong application to the teaching of English” (mla.org), and *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America’s Educationally Underprepared* by Mike Rose, who earned the 1991 CCCC Outstanding Book Award and the 2012 CCCC Exemplar Award.

The myth that the English teacher will sacrifice any semblance of a personal life to save at-risk students from both intellectual and socioeconomic impoverishment has also been popularized in such successful film adaptations as *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*. Even the real-life subjects of these stories, however, cannot live up to the glamorized cinematic versions of themselves and their efforts; I attended graduate school during the 1993–94 academic year with LouAnne Johnson, played by Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds*, and I remember her writing a twelve-page letter to Disney about how much they distorted her original book, *My Posse Don’t Do Homework*. Under the umbrella of this driving narrative, though, is very little space for honors education, which is (mis)perceived as serving a privileged population of the intellectual and socioeconomic elite who do not need to be saved through the martyrdom of English faculty.

Honors has been slightly more visible at the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication. The theme for the 2004 CCCC conference was “Making Composition Matter: Students, Citizens, Institutions, Advocacy,” so, fresh from the publication of the *Honors Composition* monograph, I submitted a proposal entitled “Composition Matters in Honors Education.” The proposal was accepted and assigned to a panel on differently-abled students, which I was also asked to chair. The other two papers for the session, however, focused on physical aspects of *differently-abled*: “Disability (Difference) Matters: Disability Studies in Two Composition Classrooms” and “Designing for Differently-Abled Bodies: Single-Sourcing Access to Information.” That this grouping of presentations seems odd probably reflects the uncertainty of how to categorize honors students. A review of the CCCC conference programs from 2004–2015, including my presentation, produced five additional items, including three honors-specific panels and two honors papers that were included in general panels.

2004 Session: *(Re)Constructing Academic Spaces for Differently-Abled Students*

Speaker 3 of 3: Annmarie Guzy, “Composition Matters in Honors Education”

2006 Session: *Research in Composition: Are We on the Right Track?*

Speaker 3 of 3: Jaime Longo, “Tracking Writing: Honors Writers, Basic Writers, and the Development of Argument”

2007 Session: *First-Year Honors Composition: The Other Margin of College Composition*

Speakers: C. McKenzie, Lisa Coleman, and Kimberly Helmer

2010 Session: *First-Year Honors Composition (FYHC): A Quantitative and Case Study*

Speakers: C. McKenzie (chair), Kim Helmer, and Karen Peirce

2012 Session: *Constructing Student Identity: Honor [sic] Placement, Peer Review, and Student Affairs Practices*

Speaker 1 of 3: CB McKenzie, “First-Year Honors Composition: Data from the Other Margin of College First-Year Composition”

2013 Session: *Characterizing the Honors Research Writing Course: Student Identity, Digital Literacy, and an Interrogative Approach to Research*

Heidi Naylor, “Conceptions and Misconceptions of the Honors Composition Student: A Quantitative-Qualitative Study”

Christi Nogle, “Digital Promises in Honors Composition”

Jan Roser, (chair), “An Honors Student-Led Interrogative Approach to Research and Identity”

FYHC: THE JOURNAL OF FIRST-YEAR HONORS COMPOSITION (2006–2011)

In the early 2000’s, Charles McKenzie (known variously as C. McKenzie, CB McKenzie, or simply McKenzie) was a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English at the University of Arizona. While completing his dissertation on postidentification rhetoric, he was also sufficiently motivated by the lack of publications on honors composition to create the online journal *FYHC: The Journal of First-Year Honors Composition (and related matters)*, which published issues in 2006 and 2011. As editor of *FYHC*, he pursued an agenda for *FYHC* as well for the subdiscipline of composition studies that would encompass not only composition courses designed for programmatic support of honors programs and colleges but also departmental composition courses, separate from honors programs, serving general students who had earned high ACT or SAT English scores. The journal’s advisory board included notable disciplinary experts such as Theresa Enos (McKenzie’s dissertation director), Stuart Brown, Jan Swearingen, Marvin Diogenes, Sondra Perl, Victor Villanueva, and honors-based composition voices from Lisa Coleman and myself. Each issue contained the following sections: Lead Article, Pedagogy, History, Student Work(s), WPA [Writing Program Administration] Views, Review, Editorial(s), and End Note. The journal’s brief lifespan might be attributed to its being a personal project that became difficult to sustain without either the institutional support of an organization or a sufficient base of researchers looking to publish their findings on honors composition.

2006 Contents

- Lead Article: Victor Villanueva, “The Rhetorics of the New Racism or The Master’s Four Tropes”
- Pedagogy: Marvin Diogenes, “Too-Muchness in (First-Year Honors) Composition: An Essay”
- History: Annmarie Guzy, “A History and Context for the Scholarly Study of First-Year Honors Composition”
- Student Work(s): Mathew Knight, Pamela Pierce, Jeremy Norden-Paul, Katelyn Sadler, and Emily Schoen, “Student Work(s) in FYHC”
- WPA Views: Anne-Marie Hall, “The Evolution of an Honors FYC,” and Thomas P. Miller, “Cutting from the Bottom, or the Top?”
- Review: Lisa L. Coleman, “Teaching Conductivity in FYHC: How to Improve the World: A Review and Application of Gregory L. Ulmer’s Internet Invention: from Literacy to Electracy”
- Editorial: C. McKenzie, “First-Year Honors Composition as an ‘Issue’”
- End Note: C. McKenzie, “End Note”

2011 Contents

- Lead Article: Carol Poster, “Professional Writing at York University: Honours Writing in Canadian Context”
- Pedagogy: Lauren Camille Mason, “Backseat Teaching: Reflections on the Instructor’s Role in a Student-Driven Project”
- Student Work(s): Alise Hofacre, “If Uncle Vanya Were a Photograph . . .”
- Editorial: C. McKenzie, “The Case for FYHC: An Editorial”
- End Note: David Reamer, “Moving First-Year Honors Composition beyond Lore and Anecdotes”

[Note: the Coleman, Guzy, Hall, and Miller pieces from the 2006 issue were republished in the 2011 issue.]

THE FUTURE OF RESEARCH IN HONORS COMPOSITION, 2016 AND BEYOND

In the face of exponential increases in AP and dual enrollment credits and the threatened extinction of the liberal general education coursework that forms the foundations of honors, honors composition specialists must definitively establish the crucial role that writing instruction plays in helping honors students move from high school writing to university-level, discipline-specific essays, reports, and research projects. Heather Camp argues in “Generative Intersections: Supporting Honors through College Composition”:

While the pressure to accelerate progress to graduation threatens to erase composition from the honors program map, activity in writing studies is building a new case for its presence in the curriculum. A closer look reveals that composition and honors share more interests and commitments than one might initially assume. It behooves both parties to explore these common interests and to discover anew how composition might enrich honors education. (65–66)

Whether this exploration and enrichment come in the form of a fundamentally re-envisioned first-year honors composition course or an evolution to advanced, upper-division writing requirements, such as honors business, technical, or science writing classes, future researchers will help determine the course of action. The most pressing concern for honors composition researchers is to move beyond anecdotal reporting, as Longo did, and demonstrate through qualitative and quantitative methodologies that allowing honors students to use standardized test scores to leapfrog from high school assignments to junior-level university coursework without additional writing instruction not only shortchanges the development of their critical thinking and argumentation skills but also decreases thesis/capstone completion and overall honors program retention rates. Honors composition as a discipline—or, more accurately, as a confluence of the two disciplines of composition studies and honors education—still needs interdisciplinary exploration and development by an increasing number of scholars in multiple venues, and I eagerly await what the next decade will bring.

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