Sixth Avenue Journal

A SPIRITED CONVERSATION ABOUT HONORS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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The new *Sixth Avenue Journal* presents informal, ordinary voices of faculty and students talking candidly about their life in higher education.

From the Honors College at The University of Alabama

"AMERICA, THIS IS WHO WE ARE, THIS IS WHAT WE DO, AND THIS IS WHY WE DO IT."

By Henry John Latta, Ph.D.
Editor-in-Chief, Sixth Avenue Journal
The Honors College, The University of Alabama

Welcome. You may well be among our very first readers. Perhaps you may also become one of our earliest contributors.

This the first issue of the *Sixth Avenue Journal,* an academic magazine from the Honors College at the University of Alabama, with a new role: present informal, ordinary voices of faculty and students talking plainly and candidly about their life in higher education. No sonorous academic writing, no sloppy social media language, but well-crafted, thoughtful, conversational English.

I have asked my contributors to write short but substantial essays about how they see and live their lives within a university or to reflect on the world of higher education.

The Journal's value, its identity, is a reliance on and comfort with everyday language to effectively present ourselves to an at best uncertain, when it comes to us, American public.

To speak informally to that public our first theme is "Why Are you Here … and How Is that Working Out for You?"

A Pew Research Center survey released in late October found that "Seven-in-ten Americans now say the higher education system in the United States is generally going in the wrong direction–up from 56% who said this in 2020, according to a new Pew Research Center survey."

Chronicle of Higher Education articles from earlier this year reported that students now see college as transactional, a vehicle to get them from A to B, and also see themselves as consumers in a corporate environment. But there are also reports that faculty draw hope and optimism from this generation of students despite their habits and practices that don't look anything like those of previous generations.

Thoughtful, persuasive conversations have been widely abandoned in this digital and social media age and crude, lesser forms of exchange unstoppably bulldozed into place as a limited but inevitable substitute. To help generate contemporary conversations about who we are and what we do, this journal will also publish your responses to our submissions.

I asked our contributors to think broadly and not to over edit themselves. Their submissions are about their work, their classes, and the way they see and feel about life on a university campus. Does the university deliver … or not. Be conversational, I asked. Maybe a little outspoken. Something in your own style. No stiff stuff, no peer review rituals, detailed citations or academic flourishes. Not too many big words. I banned social media junk writing, but vernacular and unguarded moments are sought. I asked that the words be elegantly crafted and argued, stylish, and if they have some bite so much the better. I wanted their own voices, not something careful and cardboardy that AI might spit out.

Our lead times for submissions and replies are short, so that we stay as much as possible in the moment and rewrite ourselves as little as possible.

I was going to edit submissions for style (Chicago Manual) but then decided not to. I want original voices; and strict guidelines and editing submissions into a formal style can flatten a voice and numb originality, and dilute bluntness and some of the quirki-ness I want to publish.

You'll see that most of our first contributors are from The University of Alabama, my home and my starting point. But we are looking for voices from across America. This is your invitation.

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TO CONNECT

By Leonard Cassuto, Professor, Fordham University

Just because we write doesn't mean that other people will read our stuff. Readers and writers of academic writing know that all too well. Communication entails connection, a circuit between writer and reader that carries the electric current that lights not just the academic enterprise but the human one, writ large.

We need more communication—and more connection—in the world of higher education. Colleges and universities need to do a better job showing society at large just what we do all day, and why it matters.

Higher education and that larger society exist in a mutual caretaking relation. It's a grand bargain: To the middle class we say, we will take care of your children, and in return, you will take care of us. That bargain—a mutual caretaking relation— has been in place for generations, but as I write this, years of fraying are causing it to come undone. It needs repair.

Trying to fill that need is the biggest reason I go to work these days. It's my central workplace commitment.

That commitment starts with communication. At its most fundamental level, writing is a form of outreach. We use words to try to connect to other people, to convey our thoughts and ideas as accurately as possible. That may seem obvious—but if it is, then why is so much academic writing so opaque and difficult to get through? More important, what can we do about it?

That answer is easy to state: Writers should take care of their readers. But it's difficult to implement that solution because so many academic writers are taught to do the opposite. To take care of the reader, we have to go against the grain of our own training. That training indoctrinates us from early on. As children learning to write, we quickly understand that the readers of our earliest efforts—that is, our teachers—will pay attention to our writing because it's their job.

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."
– George Bernard Shaw

The assumption that the reader will pay attention carries over to academic writing at higher levels, where it is joined by a new and pernicious obstacle: anxiety. In the competitive world of professional scholarship and scholarly publication, the desire for distinction is matched by a fear of being exposed. What if our work is examined and found wanting?

Such fears produce defensive writing, in which writers shrink back from being understood and, they fear, exposed as frauds. As a result, too many academic writers choose obscurity over clarity. The songwriter Pete Townsend describes this arrogant pose beautifully in a 1977 song, aptly titled "Misunderstood":

Just wanna be misunderstood
Wanna be feared in my neighborhood
Just wanna be a moody man
Say things that nobody can understand.

I wanna be obscure and oblique
Inscrutable and vague, so hard to pin down
I wanna leave open mouths when I speak
Want people to cry when I put them down.

The speaker in Townsend's song might as well be an academic writer. He doesn't want to connect with his audience; he just wants to impress them. That distinction is important because so many academic writers conflate its terms—but impressing people with difficulty doesn't forge a meaningful connection with them. It doesn't educate them. I stress this point because good writing teaches. It gives the reader something to hold onto.

We academic writers (both students and scholars, both beginners and established professionals) work in a marketplace of ideas that offers threat along with reward. But that marketplace is also a community. Our readers can become our allies if we can connect with them. If we understand that we're writing for actual people—not for blurry notions like adulation or invidious distinction—then we can reach out to those people and exchange ideas with them.

Rather than Pete Townsend's arrogant character, we may understand our proper goal in the words of another old song, Nina Simone's "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood." Unlike Townsend's speaker, the singer in Simone's song wants to be understood:

I'm just a soul whose intentions are good
Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood.

Good writing starts with the good intentions that Simone portrays. We should want to help our readers and meet their needs. If we do that, we also meet our own needs as communicators. Writing can be fun, and it should be. But good writing is also necessary if scholarly expertise is to gain influence to improve our human lot.

NOTES

Pete Townsend, "Misunderstood." Track on Pete Townshend and Ronnie Lane, Rough Mix. Produced by Glyn Johns. Polydor, 1977, LP.

The phrase "invidious distinction" was coined by the polymathic economist Thorstein Veblen, who understood very well the craving that intellectuals have for fame and recognition over communication and understanding. He coined the phrase in his landmark Theory of the Leisure Class (1899), but his most penetrating analysis of academic behavior appears in The Higher Learning in America (1918).

Nina Simone, "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood." Track on Broadway-Blues Ballads, Philips, 1964, LP.

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THE CLASSROOM AND THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

By W. Ross Bryan, Associate Dean of Student Development & Engagement
The University of Alabama Honors College

I am reminded of the first book I used in graduate school by a guy named John Willinsky. The first chapter of his book *Learning to Divide the World: Educating at Empires End* was titled "Where is Here?" I have often used it in classes in the Honors College as a way to position ourselves in the same metaphoric place as we begin constructing our critique of, generally speaking, education and more specifically honors education. I appreciate the opportunity to spread my wings a bit and take a shot at where I think we are in the Honors College and more broadly speaking in Honors Education. Willinsky had some things on target in this book. He was offering a critique of the western notion of schooling as being a project and byproduct of imperialism/colonialism. Trying to show the factory model of schooling as rooted in indoctrination rather than truly a liberatory project called education (stealing from Freire).

This will drive the academics (and editors) crazy…I know where we are not. We are not offering more calculus three homework or reading more texts than the non-honors courses. Honors education is not meant to be built on the Puritan work ethic of more painful work equates to a better end product. The modern honors project is meant, in many ways, to be rooted in experiences and practical application of practices that form habits of the mind (Bourdieu/Habitus). These habits are gathered as a way of being, thinking and knowing. A worthwhile endeavor indeed!

In our minds, our honors process, is supposed to go alongside students as they become Public Intellectuals and/or Agents of Positive Social Change. We are trying to create space where students can explore and construct identities which will be leaders in making substantive change for the public good. Ideally, we would do that through the collegiate or "honors" experience. These moments and/or opportunities can take place in or outside of the classroom. Society needs this. Our communities are thirsting for this. This is precisely where "here" is. This undertaking serves both the individual and the masses for the collective good.

Being an educator is one of the most gratifying professions I can think of in this world. Being in a classroom and acting as a coach, lifeguard or facilitator of discourse is incredibly fun. In keeping with the idea that we are educating and not indoctrinating our pupils, I consider myself to be this type of guide. Providing boundaries and highlighting pathways for students to explore their own notions of truth. I often remind them that I already know what I think about most things; what I am most interested in is their articulation of truth. My job is to present and posit materials meant to make the students think…appropriate pause …for themselves. In this way I think I/we/honors is doing a nice job with this job description.

However, there are, and have always been, obstacles. In this moment it feels like they are bigger and harder to dodge than usual. When I first began my teaching career, I had the opportunity to teach in a context where my students were incarcerated. I taught college courses (from UNC-Chapel Hill) in the North Carolina Prison System. This experience was enlightening to say the least. Teaching traditionally college-aged prisoners about the how and why of education gave me an introspection that is uncomfortable to this day. These times reverberate in me each and every time I step into a classroom or attempt to share with students what I think I "know" about the world we inhabit. This short story is meant to segue from "Where is here?" (Willinsky) to "how is that working out for you." All past experiences help us build our current perspectives. For me this first college teaching experience for the North Carolina Department of Corrections was particularly enlightening. It helped me gain a different insight for the need of the public good that is education. The notion that we all truly pay for the uneducated, mis-educated and undereducated.

It gives me pause that the last students I had in a classroom at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill were prisoners. My very next teaching assignment was in the Honors College at The University of Alabama. This rattles around in my head most days and most certainly the days that I spend discussing ideas with students. I suspect there are a bunch of reasons I find this uncomfortable. If we are here to take up the architectural work of helping build better communities, opportunities, thinkers, leaders and citizens, then at some point we must ask "is it working?" If the answer is a resounding YES, one must then ask "SO WHAT?" Yikes!

No matter where we are teaching, we hope that our students leave our classes asking more questions than finding answers. A good teacher pokes, prods, and cajoles students into questioning what they think about the world in comfortable and uncomfortable ways. This is harder today than in the past, I will admit that wholeheartedly. We are much more averse to change our minds. We are much more reticent to say, "I don't know". We see weakness in the budding intellectual who might respond with "I have not thought of it that way…let me chew on it." One of the bright spots in my day is that I get to openly question most ideas alongside students. Honors education is certainly not the only place that happens; it is meant to be a space where that is celebrated and encouraged without penalty. This very project you are reading in this inaugural "journal" is trying to break free from boundaries that might squelch discourse or as I like to think of them, "conversations with purpose."

How is it working? I like to think of myself as an agent of positive social change who gets to help build public intellectuals. I fear that is mostly being done (for me) in the classroom and not within the other public spaces and public goods that I hold so dear. However, we can all have agency to care and talk about things that matter. MY feeling is that this will help us along the way in honors education (and all other forms of education) and who we will become in the future.

Sixth Avenue Journal

BECOMING UNDISCIPLINED... AND YOUNGER

By Darren Surman, Director of the Achieve Scholars Program
The University of Alabama Honors College

George Harrison, the lead guitarist and arguably spiritual center of the Beatles, wrote many songs on the nature of life and its purpose during his career. In the song "Any Road," a later song of his that was released posthumously, Harrison sang, "...if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there." Bob Dylan, in his famous song "My Back Pages," sang about the process of personal growth and maturation away from previously-held ideas, identities, and beliefs. The song's most famous line is, "...I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now." I would like to work my way to both of these ideas as answers of sorts to the questions: Why are you here? How is that working for you? The "here" in question is Honors Hall, 533 6th Avenue, Tuscaloosa, AL. That address serves as the inspiration for the name of this new and exciting journal. It also, however, represents for me personally an educational journey, as well as something new and different.

WHY ARE YOU HERE? I have students who ask me all the time how I approached my undergraduate and graduate studies to prepare for becoming a professor in the Honors College. In other words, they want to know what kind of plan I had so that they might create a similar one. All I can ever tell them, likely to their disappointment, is that I never had a plan at all. Truthfully. As a first-generation student, I never planned to go to college in the first place. When I finally did, I never planned to get an undergraduate degree in Interdisciplinary Studies. (I only did after failing out of college three times.) I never planned to go to graduate school afterwards. When I did, I never planned to get a PhD with a specialization in political theory. I never planned to write about the topics of love and political theory for my dissertation; those topics only presented themselves to me very late in the game of graduate school. Once I graduated with my PhD, I never planned to work in Honors education. Hopefully, the primary theme is apparent. I did not have a plan. I simply could not have envisioned where I find myself now; that is, in Honors Hall, 533 6th Avenue. I am here because George Harrison was right; if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there.

Such a truth is premised, though, on a kind of openness; an openness to opportunities when they do present themselves. As each opportunity presented itself, first in my undergraduate studies, and later in my graduate studies, I simply, and eagerly, took them without really knowing what would come next. I hoped. I hoped that they would lead somewhere nice. And collectively, they absolutely did. The journey though was largely improvisational. Of that journey, my undergraduate experience was far, far more meaningful and defining for me than my graduate experience. My undergraduate experience was everything a person could hope for in getting an education. It was free, roaming, nomadic, creative, and open. My graduate experience was more about becoming a practicing expert within a specialization; steeped within that specialization's concepts, language, and methods. I learned how political theorists read, talk, teach, and think. In short, I simply learned in my undergraduate experience. In my graduate experience, I learned how to think like a political theorist. In the years since graduate school, I have spent considerable time and effort in unlearning some of those graduate school practices.

So, I am here, in the Honors College at The University of Alabama, because it provides an openness, and nomadism, that I hungered for after graduate school. It has allowed me a space to reconnect with my most meaningful experiences in getting an education, and it has allowed me a space to, hopefully, inspire others to the same wandering and creative tendencies.

HOW IS THAT WORKING OUT FOR YOU? During the years that I have spent working in Honors Hall on Sixth Avenue, I have found myself attempting to become more undisciplined and younger. What does that mean? It does not mean that I no longer read, talk, teach, and think like a political theorist. I am a political theorist, and I find that to be a very meaningful thing. However, I have increasingly found myself working to become less like a traditional political theorist over time. That mode of thinking, alone, simply does not satisfy me in the way that I thought it would during my graduate studies. Such a disciplinary identity is too strict, too bounded, and too conformed. For example, when I finally did decide to write my dissertation in political theory on the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard and the topic of love, I had a trusted advisor tell me, "If you write that dissertation, you'll never get a job and you'll never talk to anyone in the field." Both of those suppositions were proven false in time, but that is the kind of advice, and thought, that Bob Dylan was singing about in "My Back Pages." I could have listened to that advisor and grown older, and protective, of my disciplinary identity. Instead, I chose to become younger.

In my time in 533 6th Avenue, I have discovered transdisciplinarity, a concept that originated in 1970. On the timeline of academia, transdisciplinarity is just a baby. But, as the scholar Basarab Nicolescu stated, it celebrates the transgression of all academic disciplines. Listen to that...the transgression of all disciplines. What does that mean? What does it mean to think without reference to an academic discipline such as political science, psychology, engineering, education, business, etc.? What are those thoughts? What thoughts do not make reference to a particular discipline? Such thinking is still new and different, and discovering these ways of thinking, and ways of being, has allowed me to continue my educational journey towards a more exciting, undisciplined, and younger place. I took some varied roads to get here, and I certainly feel younger in thought than I did when I completed my PhD in 2012. How is it working for me? I'd say, it's working beautifully as I love coming to Honors Hall, 533 Sixth Avenue every day and seeing where the roads might lead next.


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LESSONS ABOUT ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

FROM MY FATHER'S HOME OFFICE

By James M. Lang, Professor of the Practice
University of Notre Dame

At some point in the 1980s, my father bought our family's first personal home computer and installed it in his home office. He was an accountant, and people like him didn't work from home in the 1980s, so he mostly plied his trade in his company's corporate office in Cleveland's Terminal Tower. His home office thus was an occasionally-used one where he would do overtime work during tax season, filling out people's tax returns in the evening with the help of his secret stash of M&M's, or where he planned our family's finances with a pile of bills, a checkbook, and a calculator.

When the computer arrived, it was not placed on his desk, but set up on a little stand in the corner of the room, which reflected—I'm guessing—his view of it as a toy rather than a tool. And, to be sure, the major users of it were his children, the most initially ardent of which was me. The computer did come with some pre-installed games, but I wasn't much of a gamer. Instead, I was drawn to the computer's user's manual, a spiral book that walked you through the steps of programming the computer to do things like solve equations or follow instructions to create some pre-determined output.

I don't have super detailed memories of my childhood, perhaps because it was largely uneventful and contented, so I can't be precise about this, but I would estimate that the era of being fascinated by the computer lasted a few months at the very most. I think it fascinated me initially because learning the coding strategies was like learning a language—this seemingly random string of characters was somehow translated by the machine into a command that it could obey. My fascination with this part of the process was a foretaste of my lifelong interest in understanding and learning languages.

But everything else about the computer eventually started to bore me. I had no real passion for math or science, so while I could see how people might use it for interesting purposes in those realms, it had limited appeal for me. At some point in working my way through the user's manual, when I had mastered the basics of coding and the formulae were becoming more complicated, I realized that I could keep learning new ways to make this thing do my bidding, but I didn't see much point to it anymore. I spent less and less time holed up in that office and went back outside and did what tweens and early teens did at that time—get on our bikes and ride them the two and a half miles to the town center, where you could buy candy at 7-11 or get a slushy at the Dairy Queen.

A half-dozen years later, when I had made a firm mental commitment to becoming a writer for both my profession and vocation, I came home from my sophomore year of college and sat down at that same computer and wrote my first novel. When it was done, just before I had to go back to school in late August, I printed it out on a dot-matrix paper and felt immensely proud of the heft of its pages. Naturally I assumed that it would give me entrée to the budding community of bratpack novelists at that time, and soon enough I would move to Los Angeles and attend literary soirees with Bret Easton Ellis. Of course the novel was a terrible piece of shit, as all first books should be. But it was mine, I had created it, I had felt energized and inspired as it was pouring out of me, and I knew that nothing else would ever feel as good as that process.

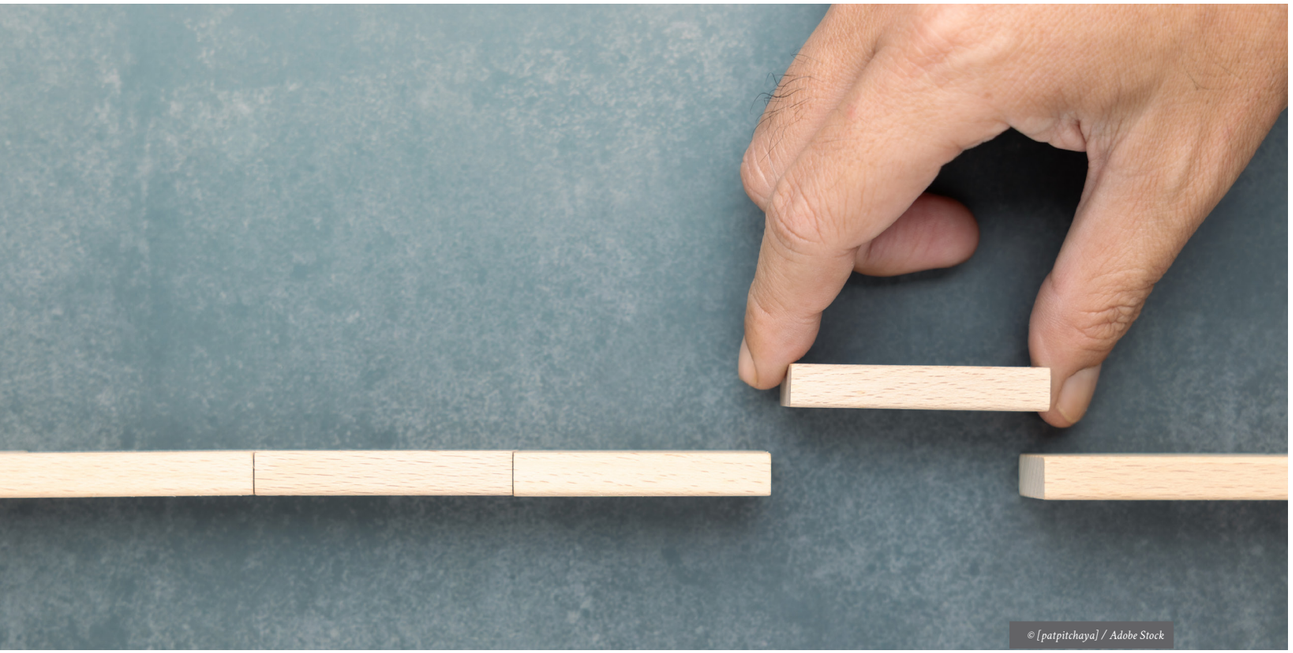
Thirty-five additional years of writing have proven me right about that. The magical process of transforming an idea or story or vision from the neurons firing in my brain to a novel arrangement of words on the page never fails to give me pleasure. It also never fails to remind me that while our initial ideas can be good ones, they become great only after they have been through the wringer of writing them down, at which point the words themselves point you in certain directions that you can choose to follow, reject, build upon, or veer away from into an unanticipated direction.

Like the direction this essay took. When I sat down to write it, I had just been reviewing my LinkedIn feed, which has become clogged with academics and technophiles who tell me that we have to integrate AI into our courses in writing and the humanities because students will need AI skills to find jobs, or because that's the direction of the future, or because AI reveals the many ways in which we have been mis-educating students since the dawn of time, and NOW we finally are going to give them what they really need, which is to integrate their brains with token-predicting machines for a post-human future.

I started with the story of the computer in my father's office just as a way to ensure that I wouldn't just come out and say what I really wanted to say, which was "I don't give a shit about anything you have written with the help of AI, no matter how beautiful it might seem, because it's been produced or co-produced by a machine and that doesn't interest me." And also: "Please don't suggest to students that they should use AI to write their essays about history, philosophy, literature, etc., because that it robs them of the pleasure, accomplishment, and transformative power of writing, which can create meaning in a world dominated by technology and commerce."

Neither of which messages are meant to say that machines—including AI—are not useful and important and even fascinating. Growing up, I had friends who never lost their fascination with their computers, and did great things with them, and I see now how people are doing great things with artificial intelligence in medicine and science and even, I guess, commerce. Good for you all.

But what I discovered in my father's office in the 1980s remains true for me today—that old computer only became interesting when I stopped expecting it to create anything interesting and meaningful with words, and instead demoted it to the role of a silent amanuensis for its human brain, exactly where it belongs, both for us and our students.



I NEED HELP: EDUCATION FOR THE CLUELESS

By Kinsey Williams, Senior Advertising Major
The University of Alabama

I spoke with a paleontologist, an actress, and a football player the other day. The actress informed me that she does a flip in the finale of Annie Jr., and the football player announced that his first game (ever) wasn't until next fall. The paleontologist simply asked me if he could learn about his career path in the building we sat in, and I regretted to inform him we do not offer those services in our building.

As an ambassador for the College of Communication and Information Sciences at Alabama, I have the honor of giving tours of our facilities to prospective students, new faculty members, and, occasionally, nine year olds. When I ask about career interest, the nine year olds are decidedly more confident in their choices than the high school seniors. I get slightly deprecating looks from the fourth graders when I confess that I didn't figure out what I wanted to do until the ripe old age of 21. Consequently, I explain that many college students don't know what they want to be when they grow up, which is why we have a Career Center Advisor to help us explore our possibilities.

At the end of my most recent tour, my advisor asked students what they learned during their day on campus. While most answers related to the football team or the cool cameras they saw, one student responded, "That we always have people to help us do what we want to do." I was shocked by her profound answer, and it impelled me to reflect on what I shared that could have prompted that takeaway. I realized that many of my talking points centered around just that–the people who help. Professors who care, advisors who guide, alumni who connect.

College is not the path for everyone, and time has proven that it isn't vital for societally deemed "success." However, if it weren't for my time in college, I wouldn't have realized my most valuable resource: help.

Though I assumed I would become a fountain of knowledge through my time in higher education, I quickly became aware of how much I don't know–to an overwhelming extent. In fact, I've learned I don't even know my personal preferences. Recently, a professor of mine began a discussion on taste, on beating the algorithm that curates one for us. To demonstrate, he had each student send in a piece of media that speaks to them, whether it be music, movies, or anything in between, and as we sat through each, most selections had a unanimous reaction once they popped up on the screen. The tunnel scene in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Lady Gaga's performance of "Paparazzi," Laurie and Jo's downfall in Greta Gerwig's *Little Women*–each a story that grasped our generation from its debut.

However, he explained, this was not taste. There is value in what this art meant to us–its significance in our young lives–but our unified love for it was primarily born of a generational, digitally-spread perspective. I sat astounded as I realized that most of the art I defined myself by was actually how a generation defined me.

The same week, I sat in our classroom, my playlist soundtracking mindless work. My professor walked in and told me that I seemed to "have my life together"–or as close to that as someone my age could–and that seemed to me the most bizarre thing I'd ever heard. He then turned his head to hear the music on the speakers, listened to the chart topper that played behind us, and recommended music to queue.

I thoroughly enjoyed it, actually. No algorithm had asked me to listen to it, nor did my professor ask me to like it, and it had no generationally labeled emotion forced behind it. I just liked it. And I apparently wasn't as overwhelmingly behind or nondescript as I thought; though I still know I have it far from "together," he enlightened me to the fact that I'm an acceptable amount of clueless.

I imagine the fourth graders that trailed the hallways of our building remained blissfully unaware of how much they have yet to learn, but I do believe they probably did feel a hint of cluelessness at the future that lies before them. However, younger minds often simplify what older ones have complicated, and in this case, they recognized the primary theme of what higher education has to offer them.

As I inch closer to "the real world," I feel quite similar to a nine-year-old: blissfully unaware of all that lies ahead, yet hungry for all it has to offer. And, thankfully, I have no doubt that as a member of an educational institution, I have the key resource to making something of that feeling: a little help.

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I AM HERE

By Brad Tuggle, Associate Professor
The University of Alabama Honors College

I am here, in Honors Hall, in the University Honors Program, in the Honors College, at The University of Alabama, in Tuscaloosa, in Alabama, in the United States, in North America, on Earth, in the Solar System, in the Milky Way, in the universe. And I am here somewhat by choice. I am also here somewhat by necessity. I am here because I believe in transdisciplinary education. I am here because I believe in public education. I am here because I believe in the free exchange of ideas. I am here because my life has been built by books. I am here because watching a student make an intellectual or personal breakthrough is thrilling. I am here because, "Roll Tide." I am here because my parents first came here. I am here because my siblings came here. I am here because I am here.

So far, it is working out pretty nicely. I have an office that overlooks the quadrangle. I have a space heater for when it gets cold. I have lots of books. People visit me in my office to talk about ideas.

Sometimes I feel privileged. Sometimes I feel oppressed. Sometimes I wonder. Sometimes I know.

Sometimes I feel like Macbeth: "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow / creeps in this petty pace from day / to the last syllable of recorded time."

Sometimes I believe Milton when he writes, "They also serve who only stand and wait."

Waiting is an uncommon practice in today's fast-paced and demanding world. But we need to wait. If I can teach students anything, I can teach them to wait. Wait for inspiration. Wait for understanding. Wait for a calling. Wait for others. Give time to the process. Let knowledge unfold.

Why wait? Because you can never hurry intellectual growth. You can't get it in a TedTalk. You can't get it in a YouTube video. You can't get it in a podcast. And you can't get it from a single book. You can only get it from years of patience. Years of reading and writing and listening and speaking and debating and conversing and trying and failing and waiting. Maybe when you are 85, you can write a coherent five-page paper about it. Maybe not. Maybe wisdom is nowhere. Or somewhere else.

When Bob Dylan considered the last days of his main source of wisdom, Woody Guthrie, and wondered where wisdom would be found when Woody died, Bob asked some important questions about looking, looking for the "hope that you know if there somewhere," and he offered a significant answer:

You can either go to the church of your choice
Or you can go to Brooklyn State Hospital
You'll find God in the church of your choice
You'll find Woody Guthrie in Brooklyn State Hospital

And though it's only my opinion
I may be right or wrong
You'll find them both
In the Grand Canyon
At sundown

You have to wait for that sunset. You can't make it happen. You can't predict when the perfectly beautiful sky painting will appear. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe today. Maybe never. Such is the chase. The chase for wisdom. And why chase it? Because it is human to do so. And you are human. And I am, too.

I'M HERE BECAUSE A PIECE OF ADVICE FROM MY MOM STUCK

By Margaret Rickman, Senior Public Health Major
The University of Alabama

If you would've asked me five years ago where I'd be going to college, I probably would've said wherever I could cheer. Cheerleading was such a big part of my life growing up. It was my community, my outlet, and the thing that gave me the most confidence. When it came time to choose a school, I was deciding between The University of Alabama and another university with a strong cheer program. My mom gave me a piece of advice that ended up changing everything. She told me, "Go somewhere that you'll love even without cheer." I didn't realize how much I'd need to hear that.

I made it to the final round of college tryouts (twelve girls left) and then I didn't make the team. I was crushed at first. But like most things in life, everything really does happen for a reason. Looking back now, I know that not making that team was one of the best things that could've happened to me. If I had, I don't think I could've done half the things I've been able to do here. Being a pre-PA student is already demanding enough, and adding cheer on top of that would've left no room for anything else. I wouldn't have had the time to join a sorority, take challenging science courses, work in patient care, or be a part of the Honors College.

When I first visited Alabama, I had already spent time at Auburn visiting my sister. Seeing her college experience made me realize how much I loved the South, the people, and the sense of community here. But I also knew I wanted to do something different from her and create my own path. Something about Tuscaloosa just felt right. I could picture myself here, even before I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

Four years later, I can honestly say it's working out better than I ever imagined. I love this university. I love the people I've met who have become my best friends, the kind who cheer you on in every sense of the word. They've pushed me to be a better student, a better leader, and a better person. The professors I've had here have shaped not only my education, but my future as a physician assistant. They've supported me through every step of this journey, from the tough science classes to writing recommendation letters for my PA school applications. Now I'm in the middle of interviews, and I can feel how everything I've done here has prepared me for what's next.

My sorority has been one of the biggest parts of my college experience. Joining Kappa Delta gave me a sense of community when I needed it most, and serving as vice president taught me more about leadership, responsibility, and communication than I ever expected. I've learned how to balance academics with real-world commitments, how to support 500 women with different goals and personalities, and how to lead with empathy. Those are lessons I'll take with me forever, especially into my career in healthcare.

When I think about why I'm here, it's honestly a mix of things: family, timing, faith, and a lot of small moments that added up to the bigger picture. I'm here because a piece of advice from my mom stuck. Because a closed door turned out to be a blessing. Because I found a university that challenged me, supported me, and shaped me into someone I'm proud of. So, how's it working out for me? Really, really well. I've learned that sometimes things not going according to plan is exactly what makes everything fall into place.

WHY AM I HERE?

By Truman Mulbery, Sophomore Mechanical Engineering Major
The University of Alabama

Why am I here? When my mind starts firing off responses to this question, it first jumps to answering the question, how did I get here? While this isn't directly a part of the prompt, I feel as though it is important to kickstart my train of thought towards figuring out why I am here. If I had to give a single-word answer to why I am here, it would be "expectations." My father is a civil engineer; my brother is a chemical engineer. I am not sure if I was expected by others to become an engineer or if I just expected myself to become one because of the circumstances, but either way, an expectation is a part of why I ended up here. I took engineering classes in high school, embracing this expectation, and when applying to schools, I ended up choosing the cheapest out-of-state school, The University of Alabama. I also knew I wanted to get away from home, so there are two more reasons why I chose here: money and distance. Now that the thought train is rolling out of the station, I can begin to explain why I am here. I am here for an education, first and foremost. I am paying for school; I am making school my first priority. I intend to succeed in school and to use that success to pave a way into a future career for myself. A huge part of what this whole college thing has taught me is that life isn't completely about school. It can be a priority, yes, but you will amount to nothing if the only good thing you can say about yourself is that you got all As. I recently landed a co-op with Mercedes-Benz, not because of my technical experience, which I have close to none of, but because of my ability to interact and socialize with people, a skill I pride myself on and work on constantly. I have a 4.0, but did any of my time studying in the library prepare me for a professional conversation with a Mercedes-Benz employer? Not one bit. I prepared for that by having conversations with people, many people, of different races, ethnicities, cultures, backgrounds, education levels, and ages. Building this social skill is another reason why I am here. Constantly making improvements to your character is one of the best things you can do in life. I think now, after all of this rambling and going on about different reasons why I am here, I can finally put it all into one sentence and say that I am here to better myself in every way, shape, and form, and to experience and take advantage of all the things that are granted to me. I am here to get smarter, to get stronger physically and mentally, to build my character, to raise my emotional and social intelligence, and to overall craft myself into a human being that I can day in and day out be proud of. Going to school here, I can confidently say that I have grown smarter after going through three semesters of college-level classes. My physical strength has grown; I take my health seriously, and I lift, do cardio, and monitor my diet. My mental strength is something that I can definitely put more effort into. I can monitor my bad decisions more closely and make sure they are limited. My character has grown exponentially; my social skills and ability to deal with all different types of humans are some of my greatest strengths after my time at university.

It wasn't all positives, though. College is difficult. That first year was the hardest year of my life; you had to learn how to live on your own and start something new, but that experience was priceless, and I am a much stronger human because of it. I am succeeding in school, I have landed a job, I have a stable relationship, and I am overall happy. Learning how the real world works and having to deal with stressful problems by yourself teaches you so much. I believe I am here for the right reasons, and I believe I am leveraging my opportunities to craft myself into a decent person, so overall I would say it is working out alright for me.

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TRANSCRIPTS

By Rob Alley, Assistant Professor, and Brad Tuggle, Associate Professor
The University of Alabama

TWO MEMBERS of the faculty of the Honors College at The University of Alabama, Rob Alley (known mostly as a musician, a man with a trumpet, who employs jazz and improvisation in his classrooms) and Brad Tuggle (known primarily as a Spenser and Shakespeare scholar) were recently wandering around their thoughts on teaching, and, feeling they were getting somewhere, they hit the record button. These are rough-cut excerpts of their conversation

[BT]: The other problem there is you read those things, and you say they're filled with ideas, and I teach 300-level classes so I deal with both freshman and seniors, but they don't see the ideas. You read something and see that it's filled with ideas and even an individual sentence will be a huge idea to you, but they don't even see that. They don't know what it is to look for ideas. What I find myself trying to model, or maybe insist upon, is that when you're reading something you're looking for insight. Part of it is for them to understand what certain kinds of writers do is that they're not just making an argument. They're also trying to say things that will send you down your own rabbit hole. That's what I think the students don't understand.

…

[RA]: I've really struggled to let them flounder around and make mistakes and not know where they're going, even though in the very beginning of the semester I tell them that what's really important about this class is that I do not have the answers. Don't come to this class expecting me to tell you what's going to be on the test, because first of all, there are no tests in my class-period. I don't give tests. We have assignments, experiments, and presentations. And everything is done in groups. It is completely experiential in nature…much like learning jazz and existing in jazz culture. If they don't learn as much from working with each other as they do from the materials I assign—and that we then discuss in seminar—they're simply not putting forth any effort.

…

But it's really hard for them, because it's hard for me to not talk when they don't know what to say. You know they have something to say, but they don't feel free to say it and we wind up talking for them. … I think what you're saying is that we're caught between the "Do I dictate to them what they ought to know, which means they're not going to get it in a real way, or do I let them do it feeling as though they're not getting it." A lot of times when you're having these conversations in these classes I see the looks on their faces like, he's totally just BS-ing me.

…

[BT]: …and that gets us back to what kind of classes we teach different. In my case, I'm basically teaching courses that are organized by time period and certain authors. So, I'm not as overtly doing the kind of things that you're doing, but I can do them covertly.

[RA]: … I said this to my students today, "Look, I know way more information right now than I'm going to be able to impart to you in this entire semester." That's a hard part of being a teacher. You try to distill it all down so that you can give it to people. So we over-prepare and then we let go and we do. The doing is the letting go. The letting go of this, but then once you do it you have to have some sort of means of assessing and reflecting, but you can't assess and prepare while you're letting go, so there's a balance between all three of those things. How are you going to achieve feeling free? The way you feel free is to let go, but you can only let go so much because you've got to sit back and ask, "was this meaningful?" and if it wasn't, or parts of it weren't, then you have to get back to the preparation aspect of it.

…

… it's a balancing issue. How am I going balance the things that are meaningful to me with the things that are meaningful to them? Because if you don't, you're not going to connect with them at all. They're just going to feel like you're some sort of clinician giving them information that they're supposed to regurgitate back to you. We know they're good at that, because that's how most of them have gotten here.

…

[RA]: I really love what you said before, about the comparison between a band, or jazz society, and a classroom. That's really meaningful to me, because I'd never thought about the entire classroom being like a jazz band. I thought more localized, like with the presentations and my own dealings with them. But I'd never thought about it in terms of a band (fifteen people)—and of course I explain to them and try to get them to understand that their contribution is important to the entire class working well. It can't just be me and two or three other people talking the whole time because that's boring. Nobody wants that. The challenge for me is to liberate them to actually contribute [their unique perspective], and for us to have a robust conversation in the fifteen-person seminar without me leading it. In the end, that's the goal.

[BT]: No, the goal in the end is for you to lead it, but if anyone was looking in from the outside, they wouldn't know you were leading it. That's the sort of like that Miles Davis thing. Somehow, you are, as the trumpeter or the band leader of the classroom, you are in complete control in the sense that you are the one that is facilitating this or allowing this or giving this the freedom for this to happen. The trick is to, and I've thought about this in terms before just of the seminars, if a seminar is successful, you should be able to just not show up to class as the teacher, because you want to create a cohesiveness in that unit such that if one musi-cian is not there, like if a student is not there for one day, that it doesn't destroy the music.

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WHEN DO STUDENTS FLOURISH?

A EUROPEAN VIEW

By Sara Hinterplattner, Professor, Media Pedagogy
The University College Upper Austria, Linz, Austria

When I think about the moments when students truly flourish, they are rarely the ones where the "right" answer is already known. Instead, I see students at their best when they are confronted with complex, open-ended questions, those that have no clear solution and demand creativity, persistence, and courage. These are the moments when students begin to see themselves not just as learners but as contributors, capable of shaping new ideas and insights. I have watched this transformation many times: when a hesitant student suddenly takes ownership of a project or when a group from different disciplines manages to weave their diverse perspectives into something genuinely innovative. This is why honors programs and interdisciplinary teaching methods matter so deeply. They create spaces where students are not only allowed but encouraged to step outside of traditional frameworks.

At my institution, the University College of Upper Austria in Linz (Austria), I work with future teachers who will be responsible for guiding gifted students. Gifted learners, in particular, thrive on challenge but suffer when their learning pace is ignored. In my doctoral research, which I carried out with Marca Wolfensberger, Zsolt Lavicza, and Barbara Sabitzer, I studied the "waiting time" experienced by honors students. Many of them described how often they felt bored or underchallenged, both in secondary schools and at university. What struck me most was their coping strategies: rather than asking for more, they often withdrew, distracting themselves or simply waiting. To me, this was a powerful reminder that student's talent and potential can be wasted if we, as educators, do not provide the right kinds of opportunities.

Honors education can help address this. When students are trusted with meaningful tasks, the "waiting time" disappears. They no longer sit idle, but instead dive into questions that truly engage them. Interdisciplinary approaches are especially effective because they mirror the complexity of real-world challenges. I have seen how students gain confidence when they realize that their perspective, whether rooted in humanities, science or education, adds something unique to the discussion. This not only strengthens their academic skills but also builds their sense of agency: the feeling that their contributions matter.

Beyond the classroom, I believe that building a European community of honors students has enormous potential. Learning across borders allows students to see their experiences in a wider context. When they meet peers who face similar struggles, whether it is the frustration of waiting in class, the challenge of managing group dynamics or the excitement of pursuing a self-driven project, they realize they are not alone. This recognition can be liberating and motivating. It also builds intercultural awareness, an essential skill for a world where collaboration rarely stops at national borders.

Personally, I am excited about this conference not only for what I can contribute but also for what I can learn. I am particularly looking forward to discussions around the "Framework for analyzing conceptions of excellence in higher education," which Michaela Schwinghammer, one of my students, is currently using. Engaging with the very scholars who developed it will be invaluable, both for my student and for my own teaching practice. I see this event as a unique opportunity to connect research, practice, and community building, exactly the kind of interdisciplinary and collaborative spirit that honors education represents.

In the end, the value of honors programs lies not in providing students with a faster track, but in giving them richer and deeper experiences. It is about recognizing their need for challenge, encouraging them to take risks, and supporting them in shaping their own learning paths. When students are given complex problems, when they are encouraged to cross disciplinary boundaries, and when they become part of a wider European network, they do more than demonstrate their potential - they expand it. And as educators, it is our privilege and responsibility to create the conditions in which that growth can happen.

When students are trusted with meaningful tasks, the "waiting time" disappears.

A JOURNEY TOWARD TRUTH

By Darrin Griffin, Professor, Communication Studies
The University of Alabama

"I use science to determine what is true."

The course offered in Communication Studies entitled Truth, Ethics, & Deception is one that asks students to seek new perspectives on the use of deceptive communication—one as effective communication. To effectively communicate with others, we must know and understand our goals, and we should understand and adapt to our audience.

I am here because I am on a truth journey. Of all the rather disparate ways to determine the truth in our lives, I latched onto social science (or, of course, science more broadly). I am comfortable reading and writing in the styles of both quantitative and qualitative research, but not rhetoric—that I've never done. Could I do that, probably, but those faculty in my department who are trained in that area do it best. I learn something about myself and others almost every day I am on campus, and I push students to think further. When they respond, I am often left with new insights for myself.

These new truths are why I keep coming back to this job, and not returning to my blue-collar roots as a tradesperson repairing houses or as a mechanic fixing cars, motorcycles, or boats.

It won't be surprising to you, the reader, to know that many of my students are religious. In the deception course, we often discuss what is true, and/or how people seek their truth. Many students, by default, interpret this based on their Christian or religious upbringing and beliefs. This is fine, but it is not generally the angle I am taking in the classroom. However, students are smart, and they can figure that out eventually with subtle cues I give them. I can see this makes them curious about my own political and religious philosophies (or opinions). I do not disclose those in my lectures, and students generally avoid asking me directly about it. One student once did...he asked directly, "Well, so what is your truth journey?" and based on the context of the lecture or discussion happening that day, it was clear to me he was inquiring about my religiosity. I paused for a second, and replied that, "I use science to determine what is true." There was a silence in the classroom, and after a moment the student replied back, "How's that going for you?" I quickly replied, "Not so good, how is religion working out for you?" The student stared at me and did not respond.

Maybe they felt judged by my quick replies or tone, or maybe they couldn't bring themselves to state out loud that it wasn't going so well for them either. I will never know. We moved on politely with no hard feelings. I am here because in my life higher education has been the place that I found answers to my personal challenges and larger social problems I witnessed in my communities growing up.

Unfortunately, it is not going so well. But the silver lining to this is that it is still the best thing I have to drive my life forward. Higher education is certainly in need of a major tune-up or repair. I have found that my blue-collar scholar philosophies work well to adapt to the disfunction caused by rapid growth of online education, face-to-face class size growth demands, and artificial intelligence abuse by both students and faculty.

MISSION STATEMENT

THE JOURNAL'S MISSION is revealed in its format. There is a reliance on, and comfort with, the conversational voice, plain speaking and thinking out loud, to effectively present the lives and thoughts of faculty and students in higher education to an, at best uncertain, when it comes to us, American public. And to each other. Thoughtful, persuasive conversations have been widely abandoned in this digital and social media age and lesser, clumsier forms of exchange unstoppably shoved into their place. To generate public conversations about life in academia, the Sixth Avenue Journal calls for short, thoughtful personal essays, clear, transparent, de-livering a talking to-your-friends story. Maybe a little outspoken. No stiff stuff, no academic writing rituals, detailed citations or dense academic flourishes. Not too many big words. The vernacular and unguarded moments sought. Elegantly crafted and argued. But no social media styling: We don't do that.

EDITORIAL TEAM

SUBMISSIONS

OUR FORMAT IS A SHORT, thoughtful, personal essay, clear, transparent, thinking out loud. Between 500 and 1,000 words.

It's about your studies, your work, your field, your campus life, your writing and/or your teaching. Conversational. Maybe a little outspoken. Something in your own style. No stiff stuff, no peer review rituals, detailed citations or academic flourishes. Not too many big words. Perhaps an anecdote. The vernacular and unguarded moments sought. Elegantly crafted and argued, stylish, and with some bite. And, of course, no social media styling, e.g. NO ALL CAPS or acronyms; we don't do that. *Transcripts* are records of spirited, informal conversations about life in higher education (with our 1,000-word limit). See the *Transcripts* page in this issue.

Email submissions to 6aj@ua.edu with name, rank/year, department, university, contact informa-tion and a few personal details you think may fit. A photo, formal or informal, encouraged. Email to request a publication schedule if later issues are more to your liking, or with questions.

Sixth Avenue Journal
Spirited conversations about life in higher education

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