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Speaking My Truth: Voices and Portraits of Honors Students of Color

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Speaking My Truth
Voices and Portraits of Honors Students of Color

Honors Program, Western Washington University

Leah Kerbs

Advised by Joan Connell

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Background and Method

Founded in 1962, the Honors Program at Western Washington University has prided itself on the cornerstones of academic excellence, student growth, and a tight-knit Honors community. With class sizes averaging 18 students and a dedicated Honors living space, the program certainly provides students a unique opportunity to build closer relationships with professors and peers alike as they pursue their goals within a larger university setting.

However, like colleges and universities across the nation, the predominantly white program has struggled to meaningfully include the voices and experiences of its students of color. For many, their relationship with the program remains a complicated story of struggling to feel included as they face alienation in the Honors living space as well as the classroom.

Thus, to truly share their experiences in Western Washington University's Honors Program, the idea of crafting oral narratives was born. Taking the lead of journalists adept in the art of storytelling such as Eli Saslow, Brandon Stanton, Mark Kramer, and Wendy Call, the process of collecting oral narratives began. Through a series of interviews, advising, learning curves, editing, and more editing, the project finally came to life.

In the following narratives we find stories of frustration and loneliness, but also resiliency and hope as students speak out and demand change. We hope this series will provide a glimpse into the true experiences of students of color in the Honors Program who have chosen to share a piece of their vulnerable yet immensely valuable story. Through truly listening and valuing their voices, we can begin to create an Honors Program that welcomes *all* students regardless of their backgrounds.

CW: Themes of depression and racism



ROSIA

I was hoping that it would become one of my closest communities, but it's not.

As told to Leah Kerbs

[Edited for length and clarity]

My dad wanted me to go to UW, but I honestly think Western was my first choice. I remember coming to tour campus, and I just loved the environment. I honestly didn't even know about the Honors Program here until I was looking through their website and thought it sounded like the Honors Program I had always done in Ghana. I didn't want to be in classes with 100 students because I wouldn't have the opportunity to engage in discussions or build relationships with professors and students. So I really joined the program for those reasons so I could gain more experiences and relationships.

I decided to declare a French major, and I am also planning to pursue the Law, Diversity, and Justice minor with Fairhaven. At some points, I questioned the point of some of my Honors classes because they don't have anything to do with my major, but I still enjoy the smaller class sizes. I think the program has helped me make some major decisions though. It was during the first year sequence that I realized, "Oh maybe I want to do this" and I decided to apply to Fairhaven.

In classes, I like to observe more. I'm fortunate that my Honors professors weren't the ones who would put me on the spot to speak for people of color. I'm thankful for that because that would be so uncomfortable. When those topics would arise, I'd just try to be quiet and observe.

I was excited when my class was doing a reading about Africa and I thought, 'Oh, that's something I know!' Usually most of the readings are about the history of America, and for me I can't relate to them because I didn't grow up here. When we did that reading, I wanted to talk about the things I knew and related to, but I was disappointed when my professor didn't give me the opportunity to share my knowledge. It feels like they think 'Well I'm the professor so I know what I'm teaching,' but in my head I'm thinking, 'Well, I lived there so I know what's going on.'

When I started the Honors Program, I was hoping that it would become one of my closest communities, but it's not. I remember prior to the first year I was trying to find a roommate on

the cohort Facebook group. I was hoping to find a person of color, but it was really disappointing. I just went with anyone who messaged me, and then I didn't click well with my roommates so I just felt alone.

Back in Ghana I was used to being around people who looked like me because we were all African. When I moved here everything was so different. It felt lonely and disappointing to know that I was one of the only people of color on my floor in Edens Hall. I think that's why I moved out. I was excited about Edens before I moved in, but after I lived there I thought 'This isn't what I was expecting.' I'd usually just go to class and then hang out with my friends in the MCC or BT. I'd just come back to Edens to sleep. I didn't have friends in the Honors Program.

I didn't go to any Honors events because I was scared I would be the only student of color and I'd feel very uncomfortable. I think Silvia starting Honors Students of Color was what really helped me. That's how I started making other friends in the Honors Program. I like how informal and fun it is. We can just talk about anything we want, and everyone is so welcoming. No one judges you for being you. Everyone just welcomes you. If it wasn't for HSOC, I don't think I'd still be in the Honors Program.

Last quarter Silvia and I met with staff from the housing department, and we were talking about how it would be really helpful if there was some designated space for honors students of color in Edens because I remember on my floor there was only maybe three students of color who I didn't know until one of them became my roommate later in the year. That way, we can all relate to each other and not be so lonely.

I don't know how they choose professors to teach the Honors courses, but I think that's also one thing that would be helpful to get professors who are actually educated and know what's going on in the fields they're teaching. Changing the curriculum so students of color can relate to it is a good thing, but we also need professors with real experience.

My cousin got accepted to Western, and he was asking about the Honors Program. I really wasn't sure if I should tell him to join or not. I think academic wise, if you think the Honors Program would help you achieve your goals as a student, then go for it, but community wise it's going to be hard. There's Honors Students of Color, so I suppose if you think you can handle it... I don't know. Some of the classes have challenged me as a student, but it's also been disappointing to know there are so few people here who look like me.



MEI

My self-doubt and overall insecurity sky rocketed.

As told to Leah Kerbs

[Edited for length and clarity]

Originally, I thought one way to make myself stand out from others would be to graduate as part of the Honors Program. People could see that I took rigorous classes and excelled. However, being able to put “Honors Program” on my resume cost me my mental health.

Going into class, we're all supposed to be really smart Honors students, but it was disappointing to see how there were very few people of color. Almost no one looked like me. Most of the time, I was the sole person of color, let alone woman of color in my Honors courses.

You never really understand what it is like to be a minority unless you actually are one.

When we are talking about complex race-based issues, we need to have a diverse group of people. Otherwise, it's just white people sharing what they think about race without truly understanding or experiencing it. In one of my classes, a student could not understand how educators could be racist, especially in modern America. Her ignorance spoke volumes. In fact, racism is sewn into our education systems, and it is continually perpetuated by the social and economic systems America continues to use.

In that same class, another white student could not comprehend why anyone would use violent tactics despite the oppression some non-white groups have faced for centuries. It felt exhausting to be surrounded by others who were so enveloped in their white privilege they could not grasp the harm of white supremacy in the least. Too many of the white students in that class said that BLM ran through their mind once in 2013 and then never again until the murder of George Floyd. I could not imagine that being my life.

I think about race every single day because I know it affects how people see me—whether that be my peers, professors, future employers, or complete strangers.

Throughout my time in the Honors Program, I felt more unsure of myself than ever. As one of the few women of color, I constantly felt like people did not see me as smart compared to my white counterparts. People didn't listen to me or think I had anything important to contribute. My opinions were brushed over, and my self-doubt and overall insecurity sky rocketed.

Constantly being in that sort of unhealthy environment has been a huge contributor to my depression and consistent suicidal thoughts.

I wanted to drop out of the Honors program my first year. I felt ignored and invisible—and I didn't want to feel like that. So that's why I transferred to a different college where half of the students were people of color. At this other college, there were so many faculty of color and I finally felt like I had approachable role models to look up to. I felt accepted, for once in my life, at this new college. It was an environment where I could learn and grow not only as a student, but as an entire person. A year later, I had to move back to Western for financial reasons. I thought my one year of being accepted as myself, as a woman of color, would be enough to get me through the rest of my time at Western.

I was wrong.

Some of the Honors students are friendly. Yet, white students and I just have such different experiences and interpretations of the world, especially given the rise of white supremacy in the last few years. White people and people of color exist in different worlds. Whatever relationships I had with the white students in the Honors Program felt very inauthentic and superficial. They could go on about their days while I was immersed in the latest instance of injustice.

I couldn't pretend I was ok because I was not.

I don't fit in with Honors kids. I don't fit in with the white kids. It's kind of ironic because many of the white students think they're so liberal and so inclusive. They think they understand their privilege, but they're really missing a lot.

Unfortunately, I haven't seen much change happen within the program over the last four years. Maybe it's because the people at the top don't really know what to do. I want to give them the benefit of the doubt, but something needs to be done urgently if they want to increase, let alone retain, the amount of students of color in the Honors Program.

In order to make the Honors Program more diverse, they need to employ more faculty of color. This will help students of color feel more comfortable in their classroom discussions. These faculty can also serve as mentors and references in their future.

It isn't just about increasing the number of students of color in the Honors Program. It's about making a safe, welcoming space where students of color can thrive in the Honors Program.



SARGUN

If I could make the Honors Program a flavor it would be bittersweet.

As told to Leah Kerbs

[Edited for length and clarity]

I always knew that the University of Washington wasn't the environment for me because it was so large. I wanted to go to a smaller university to connect with my professors and peers on a closer level. The Honors Program at Western Washington University advertised it would be 30 students or less in each class, which I really loved. That's why I chose it.

Of the Honors classes I have taken, I fell in love with my Psychology Colloquium and professor. Although the professor was white, she was an immigrant who didn't have such an Americanized perspective. She was more accommodating to other ethnicities, nationalities, and perspectives. As a psychology student, I knew I wanted to take that class, and it was one that actually helped me.

When I first joined the Honors program I was happy, but as I've become more aware of the issues in the program I've realized it was because 'ignorance is bliss.' There was a white man teaching my class on Indian history when I'm Indian. When I disagreed with him using my own knowledge and experiences, he would explain my own culture to me. I was excited when I signed up for the class, but I made the mistake of not looking at who the professor was. Then I remember, 'Wait, none of the professors in the program are BIPOC anyways,' except for Dr. Goldman.

I chose the program because of the smaller class sizes and the promise of having an intellectual environment, but now I ask myself, 'How is this going to help me in life? How is the Honors Program serving me as a student of color?' I've learned all these stories during high school and throughout my life as a person of color. It's always the colonizer's perspective.

I couldn't fit in at all with my white peers; we don't relate. One of my white peers said the N word in class without any repercussions. The only place that I feel safe, comfortable, or like I fit in is with Honors Students of Color Board (HSOC) and my Honors peers of color. Honors Students of Color Board has provided me with community, a place to rant, and a place to watch Beyonce's *Homecoming* multiple times. When I found them, I thought, 'Maybe if I stay and try to make the Honors Program a better place for students of color, those who will come after me can enjoy it.'

If I could make the Honors Program a flavor it would be bittersweet. When I think about it there are so many pros— I could put it on my resume that I graduated with honors, I found my HSOC family, I got smaller class sizes, I met Professor Erickson— but I just keep having to ask myself if it's worth it. If there comes a day when it's not worth it, I will leave the Honors Program, and that depends on the amount of change they make for students of color.

I would tell prospective students of color to be prepared to be one of the only people of color in the room. Be prepared to be one of maybe four or five students of color on your floor in Edens Hall. Be prepared for microaggressions. Be prepared for only white professors (except Dr. Goldman). Be prepared for a white curriculum. And, if you're okay with all of those and the pros of smaller class sizes, an intellectual environment, and a smaller community where you can find honors students of color, then it's all about you weighing the pros and cons. But, you need to be prepared for this predominantly white program.

I really wish the Honors Program would help us students of color because we're already reaching out. It's not like they don't intend to do anything, except they are just very complacent in their own perspective. They say, "Institutional changes take so long," but when you keep saying that it enables that very concept. Also, while Honors students of color have been asking for support and curriculum changes (especially the problematic Honors sequence and HNRS 101) for years, the Honors Program has decided to go ahead with an Honors College, and it's happening— fast. 'Institutional changes take so long' is not an excuse anymore.

The Honors Program has good intentions, but intention and impact are such different things, and that's the main issue of the program. Their impact is off, and they lack self-awareness as a majority white program. It's the difference between performative kindness and actually making changes to make me, a student of color, feel welcome in the Honors Program. You can be kind to my face, but when are you going to actually make tangible changes to the program?

When you love something you want to make it better. So to people who think we're just bashing the program, that's not true at all. We love Honors so much that we want it to become a better environment for students of color who will come after us.



ZOE

It's taken a lot more than it's given me.

As told to Leah Kerbs

[Edited for length and clarity]

The third Honors class I took was actually pretty enjoyable. We did a bunch of readings from queer people of color, and I thought 'Where did that come from?' My previous honors classes didn't include these voices. I ended up really enjoying that class. I had chosen it specifically because I saw the syllabus prior to registration, and it was the only one that included diverse readings.

It was my second honors class that some of the readings were so difficult to get through as a Jamaican person. We read one that was written by a white man who colonized Jamaica, and I remember calling my mom and saying, "Mom, I need to read you this line. It's so horrible, I can't do this anymore."

I think there was one other person of color in that class. It was so difficult to sit and listen to a bunch of white students discussing this reading that was so offensive to me. It was just horrible. If I could go back in time, I would have talked my way out of that one.

When readings like that came up where I felt particularly targeted, I just wouldn't say anything because it was too difficult for me to talk about it. For the most part, I honestly just didn't talk in classes. I let other people talk and sometimes they would say things that were problematic, but I didn't have the energy to call anyone out or to speak for my people.

I met one of my closest friends in the dorms because we were neighbors, so I'm really thankful for that, but otherwise living in the Honors dorm was probably one of my biggest mistakes. I definitely wasn't clicking with other students in the Honors Program. I went to a couple events in the beginning, but I just didn't have a good time.

I remember my RA set up a diversity talk, and I was excited for it because he was another person of color. It was only the second Honors event I went to, and he was trying to make the space more POC friendly. When I actually went though, it was so frustrating to sit there and listen to a bunch of white students talking about how they love the honors program because of the academic environment, and I'm thinking 'This is supposed to be a diversity talk.' I tried to bring up my experiences as a person of color, and it just wasn't well received at all. I remember I

left and talked to the RA for probably two or three hours afterwards and he told me, “I might do this again. I don't know.” It hasn't happened again.

I was lucky to be housed with another mixed person in Edens that I felt more comfortable with. I was really thankful for that because it helped me get through the environment— you're so surrounded by so many white people. Sometimes I just felt like I couldn't escape it. I'm really thankful that Sylvia set up Honors Students of Color because I think I really needed that as a space to rant and relate to other students of color. It's really helped me get through it.

To be honest, I was planning on transferring from Western completely. It didn't end up working out because other schools were too expensive. That's really the reason I'm still going to Western. I had thought of dropping from the Honors Program many times, but at a certain point I thought I might as well finish it because I'd already taken part of the requirements. It's taken a lot more than it's given me. It's taken a lot of time, and it's taken a lot of energy to do classes and live there. I definitely would not do it again.

I think the Honors Program was really created for white people. I'm not sure at this point if there's a way to change it enough. The curriculum is a problem, the living space is a problem, the people that they're having come is a problem, and they're not changing any of that for new students they're trying to recruit. They're just bringing more people of color into this space that isn't helpful for them.



SILVIA

I hold HSOC so close to my heart because it's so cool seeing everyone coming together.

As told to Leah Kerbs

[Edited for length and clarity]

It's with the biggest amount of hope in my heart that I say I haven't taken an Honors class that's gotten it right yet— not *yet*. Next quarter I hope to take a class about decolonizing politics that's taught by Chicana professors. That's exciting, and I know there are ESJ classes coming in the future. So I haven't *yet*, but hopefully soon.

I wouldn't say the first year sequence has helped me a lot. We read a lot of philosophical texts, but it's just the same repeated stories you always learn about. It's never things about the African Diaspora or Chicano studies, it's just this track of Greece, Europe, and the US. Later I took a class on technology and disability justice that was really enjoyable and interesting, and the professor was really engaging. We also have a lot of disabled professors on campus though, so why couldn't they have been teaching that class?

As a Mexican person, I feel like people in the program expect you to speak for all students of color, not just Mexicans. White students seems to have this talent where they discuss something that personally affects you, like racism or immigration, and then speak about it so theoretically. It's as if their minds don't grasp the fact that these things are happening to people every day. They make it so you have to stand and defend yourself and your experiences because everything they discuss is so theorized and detached. It seems to be a mix of them being such academics and being white people who probably never had friends of color growing up. This includes professors as well.

There's the students and professors, and then you're right in the middle having to speak for experiences that you have or are assumed to have as a person of color. You feel like you have to overshare in order to give yourself permission to exist in their space.

I was raised in Yakima where it's a majority Hispanic and Mexican community. Going from there to a majority white place at Western, I have never felt more out of place in my life. I invited all of my family when I moved in, and we gathered in the central hall of Edens where they prayed for me. I could just feel the stares of all the people around us. The first night here I

got sick, and I was speaking Spanish when someone looked at me weird in Eden Hall so I just shut my door. I was in Bellingham for barely two days, and I wanted to go home.

I don't feel like I fit in with anything honors students do. Even if this isn't the case for everyone, it just feels very upper-class— the words people use, the way people handle themselves, the way people speak in class. It's just not the way I was raised. Even taking IB classes in Yakima we spoke Spanglish, but here, it's very formal and stuffy to the point where you have to put on a whole different disguise in order to be heard. Even then you still want to relate to other Honors students, but I have never been snowboarding, I have left the state maybe once. They have all of these experiences where you just sit there and go, 'Ok, that's cool, can we move on?'

That first quarter I thought, 'I'm going home. I'll just go to Central Washington University.' But then there was a point where I thought, 'If I don't stay here, then other students of color aren't going to feel welcome either.'

There is already students of color who have done work for us, like the Black Student Union, so I went for what they were doing. I started going to Blue group and the Latinx Student Union. I opened a restaurant out of my dorm my first year. I asked my RA if we could do a Dia De Los Muertos event. Just things so I could feel at home and then possibly get other people to stop looking at me so weird when I would listen to Mexican music.

The idea for Honors Students of Color came to me in the spring quarter of my freshman year. My roommate was hearing my say "I feel really uncomfortable in these spaces. I mostly feel comfortable when I'm in Blue group, and I know there's other students of color in the Honors program who feel that way." So she asked me, "Well, why don't you make a club?"

I hold HSOC so close to my heart because it's so cool seeing everyone coming together. When we were still in-person we got to eat together and watch Beyonce together. It's a space for us to hang out and relate to one another as students of color without well-meaning white people offering advice. I've gotten to meet a lot of younger students and seen them grow. Knowing that through HSOC students are being empowered to take positions, it's just amazing, and I honestly cannot wait to see how it continues even after I leave.

I think listening and harm reduction are a big part of what needs to be done. The Honors Program has to work a lot more on listening. They need to learn to listen when we are

complaining about things in a very raw way. Sometimes, it's like you'll tell a professor or admin about your negative experiences and they'll say, "Well you could always go to the Office of Diversity" and it's like, "No, I came to you so you can help me. I want you to listen to me so I can tell you my experiences and you can help fix it."

Sometimes it feels like 'Did you hear what I said?' It feels like they don't hear what you said, and then you don't get solutions because they didn't really listen to you.

Honors Students of Color is really harm reduction for students who are already in the program. People are very much into, "We have to bring more students of color in, we have to make it more diverse" and it's like, "Okay, you're bringing students of color in, but how are you ensuring that they're staying?" Most of the students of color that I know in my cohort did not stay, and that's why HSOC is so small this year. They left.

I will criticize the Honors Program and not hold back, but I also want to emphasize that I hold the program very close to my heart. Not because of the program it is, but because of what it's allowed me to do with Honors Students of Color. I want to recognize that everything I criticize them on they have also allowed me and HSOC to work on.

I don't think the rest of the school is at that point yet where they're allowing students to work in this way, so I appreciate the Honors Program for that. I'm very excited for some programs we are working on: a scholarship program and a mentoring program that will really support students of color. To see these get done is so important to me so that by the time I'm out of here and the younger ones are out of here, the Honors Program is better.