



# WHY ADVENTIST HONORS EDUCATION IS SUCH A GOOD IDEA

One of the most obvious facts about education, which every teacher soon (and sometimes painfully) learns, is that students vary widely. Just as obvious should be the fact that one size and shape of education does not fit all—any more than one kind of diet, one program of exercise, or one style of clothing is best (or even appropriate) for every student. This is why Honors-type programs are an essential part of Adventist higher education. These programs are the flip side of the rationale for offering “remedial,” “compensatory,” or “pre-foundational” courses.

For those of us who are “true believers” in Honors education, however, it is easy to suppose (and tempting to claim) that this is “Adventist college education at its best.” But however good it feels to think (and say) this, it is not correct, either in principle or in fact. Excellence in higher education is not—repeat, *not*—achieved by selecting the most gifted and best-prepared students, enrolling them in the most challenging courses, having them instructed by the most scholarly professors, and giving them the most demanding assignments. Indeed, excellence in education is not defined by the ability of the students, the sophistication of the coursework, the reputation of the faculty, or the difficulty of the academic requirements.

On the contrary, excellence in education is achieved by motivating and enabling *every* student—no matter how gifted or limited, prepared or unprepared—to learn as much

and as effectively as possible. This requires commitment to designing a variety of approaches and programs that are consistent with the diversity of students’ learning styles, talents, and capabilities. Honors programs offer an education that has been carefully crafted for a significant and identifiable minority of students on North American Division (NAD) Adventist college and university campuses.

## Student Characteristics

Honors education is designed primarily for the benefit of students who possess some combination of these three characteristics:

- They are *educationally well prepared*. They have done well in their secondary education, as attested by their academic transcripts; their SAT, ACT, or comparable test scores; and evidence of their other accomplishments.
- They are *intellectually curious and venturesome*. This characteristic is different from, and does not necessarily co-exist with, being educationally well prepared. It means asking new questions, discovering or developing new answers to old questions, and recognizing that some questions do not have satisfactory answers, at least not yet.
- They are *academically disciplined*. This third characteristic again is different from being intellectually curious. It includes an ability and a willingness to work—to study and think—hard, both carefully and persistently.

BY FRITZ GUY



La Sierra University Honors students exploring Cappadocia, Turkey, as part of an international study tour.

### Educational Emphases

Since these characteristics are not unique to Honors students, it follows that Honors education is not necessarily a fundamentally different *kind* of education. Rather, it gives special emphasis to several elements that are (or ought to be) present in all Adventist higher education. Honors programs, as understood and developed in the North American Division, have selected various approaches in their attempt to accomplish this goal. Adventist higher education elsewhere has doubtless found other means for achieving it.

- Honors education encourages *critical thinking*—rigorous, careful thinking involving analysis, comparison, and evaluation—not only in regard to the ideas of others encountered in the print and electronic media and in conversation, but also in regard to one’s own ideas, understandings, and opinions. This kind of thinking includes recognizing and respecting the differences, for example, between beliefs and facts, and between the

insights of postmodernism and its excesses.

- Honors education encourages *individual initiative and independent study*. Thus, it commonly includes, among other requirements, a significant senior project. Depending on the student’s personal background and interests, this project may involve laboratory or library research, field investigation, artistic production, or public performance.

- At the same time, Honors education aims to facilitate *cooperative learning*, utilizing the dynamics of group projects, social activities, and learning communities of various kinds.

- This approach to education takes seriously the *irreducible sociality of humanness*. The divine observation that “it is not good that the human should be alone” (Genesis 2:18; translation supplied) has more than sexual and familial implications.<sup>1</sup>

- Honors education seeks to be *comprehensive*. It introduces students to facts, ideas, and insights relating to the arts, the natural and human sciences, the humanities, and religion, en-



**Top: La Sierra University students perform an experiment in the chemistry lab.**

**Bottom: Andrews University Honors students join a university outing to the Chicago Shakespeare Theater.**

abling them to participate comfortably and intelligently in non-technical conversations about every area of human interest and concern. For, as John Henry Newman famously said a century and a half ago, “All Knowledge is a whole and the separate Sciences parts of one.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, as small as Adventist universities are, they tend, like larger research institutions, to not be *universities* but *multiversities* or *polyversities* divided into schools and departments,<sup>3</sup> with the unintended and unfortunate consequence that student learning—and faculty interest—are correspondingly fragmented. While not presuming to produce the proverbial “Renaissance persons,” Honors education does intend to produce well-rounded, broadly engaged members of their social, civic, and religious communities.

- Honors education typically explores *multiple perspectives*. Since both external reality and one’s own lived existence are ineluctably interdisciplinary and multicultural, both in the ways in which they are experienced and understood, and in the ways in which one must make decisions in response to them, the facilitation of interdisciplinary and multicultural thinking and understanding is educationally desirable.

- Honors education facilitates an ability, essential to productive existence in a complex society, to *hold conflicting ideas in tension*. These intellectual conflicts may include not only religious ideas like the simultaneous humanity and deity of Jesus of Nazareth, but also psychological ideas like neurological determinism and free will, and physical science concepts like the wave and particle characteristics of light.

- Honors education emphasizes *openness to new information, better understanding, and fresh insight* so that intellectual growth becomes a way of life, a way of being human, that lasts forever. Thus, Honors programs aim to prepare their students for eternal learning.

Yet the significance of these distinctive emphases must not be exaggerated, and modesty is as appropriate in Honors education as in individual persons. Here, as everywhere else in education, the most significant variable in the quality of the outcome is the individual student. A well-planned and substantial curriculum helps, as does competent, energetic, and creative teaching, but the student remains the principal ingredient. A good student will learn well in spite of a haphazard curriculum and mediocre teaching, but without the student’s enthusiastic and diligent participation, the quality of learning will be minimal, however excellent the curriculum and teaching.

### **Ancillary Benefits**

Besides benefiting a particular group of students, Honors education benefits the teachers who participate in it and the colleges and universities that offer it. It gives teachers an opportunity and incentive to think and teach in new ways. Curious and creative students stimulate teachers to explore innovative subject matter, such as the presentations of Jesus in contemporary cinema or the effect of parent-child relationships on political perspectives.<sup>4</sup> This creativity often extends to the teachers’ other courses as well, thus enlivening the overall educational atmosphere of the campus.

Honors education thus has the potential to benefit not only the students and teachers who are directly involved, but also

the institution as a whole. For one thing, Honors education can add intellectual vitality and richness to the campus culture—by the kinds of guest lectures it sponsors, as well as by the kinds of lunchtime conversations it inspires. Honors education can also function as a proving ground for educational experiments and innovations that can be expanded to enhance the quality of education for larger parts of the institution, and even for the school as a whole. A successful experiment with team-taught interdisciplinary courses might, for example, lead to the incorporation of such courses into the general-education require-

programs take some of the brightest and most interesting students out of general-education courses, to the dismay of the teachers of those courses. Furthermore, students and teachers involved in Honors education could come to regard themselves as a kind of campus elite.

On the other hand, Adventist education has for more than a hundred years been encouraged to be “elite” in quality. The idea that “higher than the highest human thought can reach is God’s ideal for His children” entails an educational environment in which students can “advance as fast and as far as possible in every

branch of true knowledge.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, “it is the work of true education . . . to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other [people’s] thought.”<sup>6</sup>

The goal of Honors education is to provide for students an *elite education* while inoculating them against *elitist attitudes*. Just as there are elite athletes who are not at all elitist—indeed, many are enthusiastic participants in a variety of service programs—so there can be Honors education that encourages the highest ideals, attitudes, and actions, and Honors students who exemplify those virtues. It is, in fact, the inadequately educated, whose intellectual vision is narrow and human awareness is small, who are the most likely to imagine themselves as knowing more than they actually know, and to pretend to be wise beyond their capacity. “The greater the ignorance, the greater the dogmatism.”<sup>7</sup>

In their desire to foster group identity as a kind of “ed-

ucational family,” Honors program organizers sometimes encourage students to live in designated residential facilities. This can be problematic if it results in attitudes of superiority, but it need not do so. A “natural family,” in which children live with parents in a traditional household, has an identity of which everyone is aware and appreciative, but this identity need not be exclusivist; on the contrary, an important part of that identity can be an eager inclusiveness—a genuine openness to and a warm concern for neighbors and the larger community.

The same tension between identity and inclusiveness exists for every organization that functions as part of a larger entity—ethnic clubs within a student body, departments within a college, and schools within a university. It is true that identification with and loyalty to a smaller group tends to detract to some extent from one’s identification with and loyalty to the

**“The greatest value in La Sierra’s Honors program was the community of great thinkers it established. Having a diverse group of students who were dedicated to being the best they could be was an irreplaceable life experience. From the beginning, the Honors program instilled in us more than an academic drive, but a compassion for the world. I can think of no better example in my academic career, perhaps in my life, of encouraging Christlike behavior. Our professors treated us as adults, and in return we were expected to contribute as adults. The Honors program established lasting friendships and values, and was an important part of the process of growing up”**

(Mike Tyler, alumnus planning a graduate degree in acting).

ments for all baccalaureate degrees.

Another potential institutional benefit of Honors education is its attractiveness to the kinds of students it is designed to serve—students who might otherwise seek a college experience elsewhere. And these are students every Adventist college or university wants to attract and retain.

To be sure, these ancillary benefits are not the primary reasons for providing Honors education, but they can make it a significant institutional asset.

### **Common Criticisms**

Honors education does have its critics, and some of the criticisms raise legitimate questions.

Sometimes Honors education is alleged to be “elitist.” On the one hand, this description is understandable, since these



**Top: La Sierra University Honors students in front of Honors residence hall.**

**Bottom: Andrews University Honors Scholar Jonathan Van Omam shares his research at the annual Andrews University Honors Poster Session.**

larger group, but the benefit is often worth the cost. Life is, after all, a series of trade-offs.

A similar observation can be made regarding the economics of Honors education. No one argues that providing Honors education will save money for the college or university. One hardly needs an M.B.A. to recognize that as long as there are empty seats in the classrooms for general-education courses, it costs less to put students in those seats than to offer special Honors courses. An Honors program can be justified only to the extent that some students are better served by those types of courses. When students come back decades later and say, “The Honors program changed my whole way of thinking,” Honors education seems clearly worth the cost.

## Concluding Convictions

The Adventist commitment to education has many dimensions, of which the most basic is the awareness of the multidimensional unity of human personhood—the integration of the physical, the mental, the social, and the spiritual. The most prominent focus of this Adventist awareness has been on the effect of physical health on one’s spiritual condition; our belief in their interrelatedness has provided a theological basis for the profound Adventist concern for healthful living and the church’s prodigious commitment to health care. Just as theologically significant, however, is the relation of the mental to the spiritual, and to the actualization of human wholeness. When any of the dimensions is missing or deficient, this inhibits the flourishing of human personhood.

Hence, the historic Adventist commitment to education is revealed not only in the development and support of education for ministry, teaching, medicine and other health professions, business, and scholarly research, as well as a variety of technical careers—but also in the equally essential development of educational strategies to produce broadly educated Christians. Thus, our schools have incorporated into their curricula a variety of educational experiences, including everything from remedial to Honors programs (or similar enrichment options) for the students who can be benefited—blessed—by these programs.

The proper question, then, can never be, “Why do Adventist colleges and universities offer an Honors education (or similar types of programs)?” The proper question is, instead, “Why *wouldn’t* an Adventist college or university provide such an educational experience?” This approach to higher education thus can be regarded as an Adventist imperative. ✍



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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See Arthur E. Holmes, “College as Community,” in *The Idea of a Christian College*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 77-85.
2. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, Martin J. Svaglic, ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 74.
3. This observation comes from a comment by Langdon Gilkey introducing a lecture by Paul Tillich at the University of Chicago in approximately 1967-1968.
4. Depending on the culture of a particular campus, one might envision topics with imaginative (though serious) titles like “Jesus in the Movies” and “Daddy Made Me a Republican.”
5. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 18.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
7. This aphorism is commonly attributed, without specific documentation, to William Osler. See, for example, [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/w/william\\_osler.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/w/william_osler.html).