



“ENDOWED WITH A POWER AKIN TO THAT OF THE CREATOR”

GOALS OF AN ADVENTIST HONORS EDUCATION

The well-known phrases from Ellen White—“*Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do. . . . It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s thought. . . . Instead of educated weaklings, institutions of learning may send forth men [and women] strong to think and to act, men [and women] who are masters and not slaves of circumstances, men [and women] who possess breadth of mind, clearness of thought, and the courage of their convictions*” are woven into the DNA of Honors programs offered at Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities in North America.

Although the nature, structure, and method of delivery varies among Honors programs, each has the clear intent of offering academically gifted students curriculum and experiences that will challenge and inspire them. Honors programs offer such students something *different* from the norm. Generally, undergraduate education in North America has a two-part structure: one’s major field of study (intensive study within a chosen academic field such as history, biology, or religion) and what is often called a “general education” or “GE” component. Usually, the GE requirement stipulates that students take a designated number of classes from certain

prescribed areas such as science, history, English, religion, and psychology (among others) in the belief that they will thus acquire a “well-rounded” liberal-arts education.

A More Innovative Approach

While this approach works for the majority of students, institutions that offer Honors programs have concluded that the smorgasbord approach to general education does not work for everyone, and that an Honors program allows more innovative ways to engage, stimulate, and educate those students who desire a different and intensive immersion in the world of ideas. In essence, it provides such students with a home, a place to be challenged, to explore ideas, and to grow intellectually and spiritually.

In the United States, the professional organization for schools offering Honors programs is the National Collegiate Honors Council.² While Honors programs vary in composition and goals, in general they agree that “the central goal of Honors education is academic enrichment.” This enrichment is achieved because students “profit from close contact with faculty, small courses, seminars or one-on-one instruction, course work shared with other gifted students, individual research projects, internships, foreign study, and campus or community service.” The Adventist universities and colleges

BY JOHN McDOWELL

that offer Honors programs embrace this goal of academic enrichment.³ Why? Because it works.

Shared Goals

While the goals of the various programs offered at universities and colleges in North America are expressed in different ways, they share common ideas that all involve academic enrichment focused on “a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do.” At Union College (Lincoln, Nebraska), the Honors program regards as essential to its mission to *inspire*: “The mission of Union Scholars is to inspire academically gifted students to excellence in learning, spirituality and service.”⁴ The program at La Sierra University (Riverside, California) aims to “charge the imagination,” and Southwestern Adventist University (Keene, Texas) presents its curriculum as a way for students to “explore the human search for an understanding

of one’s relationship to self, society, nature, and God.” The goal here is for students to be able to balance ideas, evidence, and argument with readings, discussion, and questions that are timeless in their philosophical significance and timely in their relevance in dealing with current issues.

Observers might wonder: How do these and the other Honors programs plan to accomplish the aforementioned goals, and how are an Honors program’s goals different from the usual goals of a general-education program? Here again, there are similar answers. To accomplish the stated goals, most programs take an interdisciplinary approach to learning. This arises from the belief, as stated in the Honors program review for Pacific Union College (Angwin, California), that:

“The world is not neatly organized according to different realms of knowledge; general education should not be either. While frequently overlapping, different disciplines—from the-



A Washington Adventist University Honors student (center) participates with other WAU students at the food charity Slice of Life during the university’s Service Day.



Top: A La Sierra University senior Honors scholarship presentation. Bottom: Walla Walla University Honors students work on a project at the library.

ology to music to physics to literary theory—all present particular visions of the world. The Honors program aims to set these fields of study side by side and see what they (and we) can learn from each other. The goal is synthesis rather than compartmentalization.”⁵

At Atlantic Union College (AUC) in South Lancaster, Massachusetts, many of the courses are interdisciplinary, and students are “encouraged to recognize the interrelation of all knowledge, to investigate topics of their own choosing.” The desire here, as with all the programs but well stated by AUC, is to have students “develop their individual creative potential.”

In her exit interview, a recent graduate from Pacific Union College’s program provided evidence that the approach works. She wrote—in answer to the question about the goal to prepare students “for a lifetime of critical thought, intellectual curiosity, aesthetic appreciation, and spiritual development”—that:

“Honors has taught me to question even more the ways in which [the world of thought] works. . . . The aesthetic is also very much a part of my spiritual development. Over the past four years in Honors. . . . I have felt the closest to God when engaged in that intellectual curiosity and the creation of art. To me, God cannot be separated from these.”

Because Honors programs are selective and thus tend to offer smaller courses where discussion is valued over lecturing and mutual learning is the model, many of them schedule team-taught classes—often by professors from different fields. Again, this is done because of a belief in the value of *integrating* knowledge. In such a context, the integration of faith and learning becomes a natural and core part of the programs.

Common Themes

Another common theme among Honors programs, as illustrated by the one at Walla Walla University, is the use of “primary source material.”⁶ The program descriptions at Andrews University (Berrien Springs, Michigan) and Pacific Union College speak of seminars that revolve around the use of “great books.” There is a sense that students in these programs should engage primary sources without the mediation of an explanatory textbook. Honors program planners believe for students to become truly independent thinkers, they *must* encounter ideas head-on, in order, as La Sierra’s program description puts it, “to understand a wide variety of perspectives across space and time, and explore the ways these perspectives interrelate.”

All the Adventist Honors programs emphasize academic rigor. Participating students are to “foster critical thinking skills” (Southwestern Adventist University, Keene, Texas), so that they can “explore subject material in great depth and breadth” (Washington Adventist University, Takoma Park, Maryland), and be “independent” (Walla Walla University, College Place, Washington) thinkers. Such rigor provides for “intellectual, spiritual, and social development” (Andrews University). Although Pacific Union College states that the “world of ideas is worth inhabiting for its own sake,” this is not the essence for what it means to be part of an Honors program on a Seventh-day Adventist college or university campus. Most programs require a capstone research project. The program at Andrews University articulates this requirement well and offers

a good example of what other programs do. Participation in the Andrews Honors program “includes a significant Senior Project or Thesis,” which is seen as a “valuable asset in job-seeking or to include in applications to graduate or professional school, and an important first step towards publishing. . . .” Students learn the skills in Honors to produce significant research. The research requirements of the Honors programs are applicable to their major and future careers.⁷

Religious Component

All of the Adventist Honors programs include a significant religious component. Pacific Union College’s students understand and “evaluate significant works of world art and culture in a Christian context.” Andrews University describes its program as being “distinctively Christian.” Union College’s program has as one of its goals that students will be able to “connect life and learning with spiritual values.” While each of the



Pacific Union College Honors students traveled to Rome to see the Piazza del Pantheon as part of a seminar on the development of beauty in Western culture.

Honors programs requires students to grapple with global issues by learning about ideas and culture (particularly of the Western tradition), it is clear that this occurs within the Christian perspective that makes Seventh-day Adventist higher education distinctive.

An important, if not key, aspect of connecting life and learning with spiritual values is service. La Sierra University makes service an explicit part of its Honors program by encouraging students to “engage in their communities” on several levels (“civic, professional, religious, cultural, and global”). For some programs, this means, in part, a trip abroad where students participate in a community project.

Thus, the goal of Adventist Honors programs is for students to be (1) able to inhabit the world of ideas with ease and acumen, (2) capable of handling questions that are timeless in their significance and timely in their relevance to current issues, and (3) capable of living well-examined lives that are committed to the thrill of lifelong learning.

Creating a Community

To accomplish this goal, all North American Division (NAD) Honors programs create a *community* where students can safely raise questions, engage with interesting and challenging ideas, and socialize and fellowship together. For example, at Southwestern Adventist University, students attend concerts, plays, lectures, and vespers programs as part of their Honors experience. Each program builds on the premise that learning must not be confined to the classroom. A strong ethos of *engagement* pervades all of the programs: engagement with important ideas, engagement with others, engagement with culture, and engagement with God.

Honors programs in NAD schools provide a specialized context where honest intellectual and creative activity can be modeled in a way that is not just “Christian” but *Adventist*. These programs demonstrate that Adventism, and Adventist higher education in general, values and has a wonderful tradition of seeking truth. They model the reality that, in a supportive context, Adventist young people can and should ask difficult questions because faith does not need to cower and fear the intellectual challenges of the world. By studying and understanding “a wide variety of perspectives across space and time” (La Sierra University) students acquire the confidence to let their light shine brightly and become masters and not slaves of circumstance.

Because the rigors of the programs have honed their critical thinking and judgment, graduates from Honors programs are particularly well suited to avoid the temptations of instant, ready-mixed “truths,” political, social, and parochial biases, as well as the current convenient cant of media and demagogues. Honors program graduates develop the power to think and to do, and thus to champion the good in a sin-scarred world. ✍



John McDowell, Ph.D., is Director of the Honors Program at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California.

REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), pp. 17, 18.
2. For more information about the National Collegiate Honors Council, view their Website: <http://www.nchchonors.org>. Quotations from the National Collegiate Honors Council are from the Website under the section, “What Is Honors?”
3. Several Adventist schools are members of the National Collegiate Honors Council: Andrews University, La Sierra University, Southern Adventist University, and Union College. (See <http://www.nchchonors.org>.)
4. All quotations from the various institutions are taken from the schools’ Web pages devoted to their respective Honors programs, or from e-mails sent to the author of this article from the directors of the respective programs.
5. Pacific Union College, Honors Program Review, 2007.
6. For more information, see <http://honors.wallawalla.edu>.
7. Examples of Honors theses at Andrews University are available online: <http://www.andrews.edu/services/honors/research/index.html>.