



THE NATURE OF HONORS EDUCATION

Defining the nature of Honors education is not unlike attempting to define Romanticism: It is more of an attitude than a creed. This is because there is no all-purpose template for an Honors program. Each Honors program must fit its respective campus culture, student scholars, and participating faculty. Thus, the nature of the Honors program will necessarily vary widely among campuses. That said, we can discern some traits common to most Honors programs, both in Adventist schools and elsewhere.

Typically, Honors students demand more of themselves and more of their instructors. They normally see the course syllabus as a starting point, not a contract limiting their achievement. Merely obtaining a college degree and moving on to the next stage of their career is not enough for Honors students. If an effective education by defi-

nition forces students out of their comfort zone, Honors students are the type who relish this kind of opportunity. And although Honors students must maintain a high grade-point average to remain in the program, they are also forced to put those grades at risk by a curriculum that is unkind to narrow aptitudes and areas of specialization.

To illustrate this concept of risk, we see some students choosing Honors even when they do not like all the requirements of the program. When I encourage exceptional students to consider applying to the Honors program, many respond that the mathematics course requirement is a deal-breaker. Distinguished liberal-arts majors quake at the thought of taking a laboratory science course. Talented science majors experience angst at the intermediate foreign-language requirement. Honors students, however, are risk-seekers, often displaying a kind of intellectual daring that makes working with them inspiring for both faculty and administrators.

Foreign Language Requirements

Many Honors programs include a foreign-language requirement (however, North American Adventist Honors program requirements in this area vary widely). This would appear to be in keeping with the traditional liberal-arts education that explores the many avenues of being human, stressing that no single culture can fully convey the human capacity for imagination and experience. Indeed, the foreign-language requirement of many Honors programs often constitutes a hurdle for B.S. majors.

On my own campus (Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee), where we require Honors students to master a foreign language to the intermediate level, we face a decreasing number of language options. We have a variety of elementary-level courses but are unable to predict (based on course en-

BY MARK PEACH

rollment) whether or not an intermediate-level class will be offered, which may leave Honors students stranded. Further, our Honors committee will at some future point have to re-examine the question of whether American Sign Language is an appropriate foreign-language option for our program.

Comparisons and Contrasts With Traditional College Programs

The issue, of course, is the extent to which an Honors course of study should resemble classical liberal-arts education (with emphasis on humanities study) or the modern pragmatic approach that seeks to facilitate effectiveness in a variety of professions. This challenge, along with many others, has the beneficial effect of forcing students, faculty, and administrators to carefully consider just what the ultimate goal of an Honors program should be.

Cross-Disciplinary Features

Another fundamental feature of Honors curricula is cross-disciplinary study, ideally taught by professors in complementary disciplines. The opportunity to witness and experiment with converging and competing methodologies in a single class period is one of the most intellectually stimulating experiences higher education can offer. The spirited discussions and occasional arguments between two professors not only teach students the eye-opening lesson that professors do not necessarily agree on all things, but also that under the right circumstances, intellectual disagreements can produce light and not just heat. This works best when both professors are present at each class period, rather than teaching alternating class periods. A course on the sociology of religion I took many years ago at Walla Walla University in College Place, Washington (taught by Robert Gardner and Gerald Winslow) profoundly changed the way I understand the role of religion in society. Though it is expensive in terms of human resources, students and professors alike testify to the benefits of this approach.

Cross-disciplinary courses featuring religion and the sciences are especially

beneficial to Honors students at Seventh-day Adventist institutions. For believing Christians in a culture saturated with material scientific values and assumptions that scorn the validity of transcendental insight, courses team-taught by theologians and scientists offer a particularly rewarding opportunity. One can easily imagine other

fruitful pairings: technology courses that combine manual skills with history of technique; visual arts and mathematics; and ethics and business. Designing cross-disciplinary courses can be demanding, however; persuading deans and chairs to allow their departmental faculty to devote time to the Honors program may be difficult.



Southwestern Adventist University Honors students and faculty gather for lunch in Athens for discussion about their visit to the Acropolis and new Acropolis Museum.

The Honors Program's Place on Campus

A fundamental challenge of any Honors program is the relationship between the Honors community and the campus. Often instructors and administrators see young people enrolled in Honors programs as exemplary students who will have the most beneficial impact on campus if they experience maximum interaction and integration with non-Honors students. But it is difficult to achieve the potential synergy of exceptional students by dispersing them over the entire campus. Honors communities cannot be relied upon to spontaneously self-generate; creating them takes effort. An Honors learning community cannot exist without shared experiences and shared spaces. A comprehensive Honors general-education curriculum facilitates the creation of cohorts, supported by co-curricular activities both on and off campus. Some Honors programs establish separate dormitories for their students to promote this type of integration and synergy.



Above: Walla Walla University Honors students meet Alexander Calder's *Eagle* at the Olympic Sculpture Park in Seattle, Washington.

Right: A significant benefit of Honors programs is the creation of community and the formation of lifelong friendships. Seen here are participants in Atlantic Union College's annual Honors Core retreat.

Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program

Generated by the National Collegiate Honors Council*

"Although no single or definitive honors program model can or should be superimposed on all types of institutions, the National Collegiate Honors Council has identified a number of best practices that are common to successful and fully developed honors programs.

1. "The honors program offers carefully designed educational experiences that meet the needs and abilities of the undergraduate students it serves. A clearly articulated set of admission criteria (e.g., GPA, SAT score, a written essay, satisfactory progress, etc.) identifies the targeted student population served by the honors program. The program clearly specifies the requirements needed for retention and satisfactory completion.

2. "The program has a clear mandate from the institution's administration in the form of a mission statement or charter

document that includes the objectives and responsibilities of honors and defines the place of honors in the administrative and academic structure of the institution. The statement ensures the permanence and stability of honors by guaranteeing that adequate infrastructure resources, including an appropriate budget as well as appropriate faculty, staff, and administrative support when necessary, are allocated to honors so that the program avoids dependence on the good will and energy of particular faculty members or administrators for survival. In other words, the program is fully institutionalized (like comparable units on campus) so that it can build a lasting tradition of excellence.

3. "The honors director reports to the chief academic officer of the institution.

4. "The honors curriculum, established in harmony with



Diversifying Honors Enrollment

Another challenge is finding ways to diversify the Honors learning community. It is difficult to accommodate majors with few electives, such as business, nursing, and engineering. Because Honors curricula seem to be the last bastion of traditional liberal-arts education, enrolling a diversity of majors proves a daunting task, often necessitating program complexity and consequently heavier administrative investment. Achieving ethnic and socio-economic diversity is a significant challenge for many Honors programs.

One of the most significant and long-lasting benefits of an Honors program is the relationships that grow out of the seminars, service work, off-campus excursions, student-student relationships, student-professor relationships, and professor-professor relationships. Discipline-specific clubs and departmental honor societies offer students opportunities to identify with and learn from other students *within their major*. Honors programs, however, provide students with opportunities to compare worldviews and meth-

the mission statement, meets the needs of the students in the program and features special courses, seminars, colloquia, experiential learning opportunities, undergraduate research opportunities, or other independent-study options.

5. "The program requirements constitute a substantial portion of the participants' undergraduate work, typically 20% to 25% of the total course work and certainly no less than 15%.

6. "The curriculum of the program is designed so that honors requirements can, when appropriate, also satisfy general education requirements, major or disciplinary requirements, and preprofessional or professional training requirements.

7. "The program provides a locus of visible and highly reputed standards and models of excellence for students and faculty across the campus.

8. "The criteria for selection of honors faculty include exceptional teaching skills, the ability to provide intellectual leadership and mentoring for able students, and support for the mission of honors education.

9. "The program is located in suitable, preferably prominent, quarters on campus that provide both access for the students and a focal point for honors activity. Those accommodations include space for honors administrative, faculty, and support staff functions as appropriate. They may include space for an honors lounge, library, reading rooms, and computer facilities. If the honors program has a significant residential component, the honors housing and residential life functions are designed to meet the academic and social needs of honors students.

10. "The program has a standing committee or council of faculty members that works with the director or other administrative officer and is involved in honors curriculum, governance, policy, development, and evaluation deliberations. The composition of that group represents the colleges and/or departments served by the program and also elicits support for the program from across the campus.

11. "Honors students are assured a voice in the governance and direction of the honors program. This can be achieved




Honors programs include many cultural enrichment activities. Students from Southwestern Adventist University and Union College joined together in February 2009 to visit an exhibit of artifacts related to King Tutankhamun in Dallas, Texas.

odologies with students of *other* disciplines, often in circumstances conducive to memorable conversations (in my case, most recently in a filled-to-capacity minivan on a nine-hour return trip from an Honors conference). These discussions, sometimes structured, sometimes not, often form the richest experiences students take away from their programs.

Benefits of the Senior Honors Project

One of the most productive relationship-building experiences for Honors students is the senior project. When asked about the most meaningful part of their college education, graduating Honors students frequently mention the opportunity to work one-on-one with a faculty supervisor while re-

searching and completing a senior project. The sustained cooperation between student and professor is mutually rewarding.

Adventist higher education has invested considerable resources in its efforts to aid low-achieving students; we very likely invest, per capita, much fewer resources in our most accomplished and adventurous students. As we train the next generation of leaders, both for our denomination and to become the salt and light in their communities, we need to thoughtfully consider what we owe our intellectually superior students and how we can best enrich their undergraduate educations. 



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through a student committee that conducts its business with as much autonomy as possible but works in collaboration with the administration and faculty to maintain excellence in the program. Honors students are included in governance, serving on the advisory/policy committee as well as constituting the group that governs the student association.

12. "Honors students receive honors-related academic advising from qualified faculty and/or staff.

13. "The program serves as a laboratory within which faculty feel welcome to experiment with new subjects, approaches, and pedagogies. When proven successful, such efforts in curriculum and pedagogical development can serve as prototypes for initiatives that can become institutionalized across the campus.

14. "The program engages in continuous assessment and evaluation and is open to the need for change in order to maintain its distinctive position of offering exceptional and enhanced educational opportunities to honors students.

15. "The program emphasizes active learning and partici-

patory education by offering opportunities for students to participate in regional and national conferences, Honors Semesters, international programs, community service, internships, undergraduate research, and other types of experiential education.

16. "When appropriate, two-year and four-year programs have articulation agreements by which honors graduates from two-year programs who meet previously agreed-upon requirements are accepted into four-year honors programs.

17. "The program provides priority enrollment for active honors students in recognition of scheduling difficulties caused by the need to satisfy both honors and major program(s) requirements."

*Approved by the NCHC Executive Committee on March 4, 1994; amended by the NCHC Board of Directors on November 23, 2007; further amended by the NCHC Board of Directors on February 19, 2010: <http://www.nchchonors.org/basichonorsprogramcharacteristics.shtml>. Reproduced by permission.