



# STUDENT RESPONSES TO ADVENTIST HONORS EDUCATION

**W**hile intellectual stimulation and academic accomplishment are often seen as the chief benefits of Honors education, Adventist students writing about their Honors experience also describe the spiritual and social benefits of these programs. The integration of these three aspects may well be one of the outstanding aspects of the Adventist Honors experience.

The integrative aspect of an Adventist Honors education became evident when current and former students were invited in the fall of 2009 to write short descriptions of their Honors education. Twenty-one students responded from five Adventist campuses. In writing this article, I have used their words to suggest how an Honors education enriches students academically, spiritually, and socially.

## **Intellectual Benefits**

When students described their perception of the intellectual aspect of Honors, they often focused on how the courses they took enabled them to explore new ideas. For example, Beth Johnston, who graduated from the Honors program at Pacific Union College (Angwin, California) in 2001, is currently a surgical resident at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. She wrote, "My Honors education experience broadened my perspective on the world in a way that general education would never have done for me. I spent half of the time in college in a general-education model and half of my

time in an Honors model, so I am sure of this. The Honors experience enabled me to debate larger ideas and thoughts from original sources in a small-group environment, which was ideal for me. My mind was engaged in constant learning without the pressure of constant competition as occurred in most of the pre-med classes I took."

Other students reported that their Honors education gave them a thirst for learning that continued after graduation. One student reported how the fact that "the rest of the students in the classes had just as much drive and interest in learning as I did made the whole experience exciting, challenging and enjoyable." Another student said that the program gave him an appreciation for the aesthetic, since he "did not like the arts" until he enrolled in the Honors program at Pacific Union College.

The intellectual stimulation has paid off for many Honors graduates; for example, Andrew Howe described how his time spent in the Honors program at La Sierra University (Riverside, California) was critical to his development as a conscientious contributor to the various communities with which he interacts. He says, "The courses I took and the professors I took them from encouraged a broader worldview, one that took into account the importance of difference in social and cultural contexts. I also learned a depth of analysis that greatly enhanced my graduate studies after leaving La Sierra University. The professors encouraged me to travel, pushed me to broaden my mind, and supported my endeavor-

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BY EDWARD ALLEN

ors. A decade later, I was fortunate enough to return to La Sierra as a member of the faculty and have enjoyed participating in the Honors program in a different capacity.”

### Spiritual Impact

Many of the students who wrote about their Honors experience spoke of its spiritual impact on them. Kristin Denslow, who graduated from Andrews University (Berrien Springs, Michigan) in 2006 and is currently working toward a Ph.D. in English at the University of Florida, credits the Honors program with inspiring her to pursue graduate studies in English. She wrote that one of the highlights of her Honors experience was learning the value of connecting her academic life with her spiritual life. She writes, “I had daily models of incredible scholars who derived great joy from the practice of integrating these two worlds. The examples of these professors continue to inspire me to think about the ongoing relationship of my spiritual life and my academic life.”

Another student wrote that the significant spiritual component of her Honors education came as a surprise. She described how she had grown up with a constant, though by no means rigorous, religious faith. She noted that she could have taken many spiritual roads during her college years. However, she said, “Rather than fading in my spiritual faith, I have increased in zeal, curiosity, and gratitude for my relationship with God and community. This growth is more attributable to the Honors program at Pacific Union College and its faculty than any other single factor in my experience at the college.”

### Social Aspects

The third component that students spoke about was the social aspect. Sean Metherell, who recently completed his J.D. at the University of Pennsylvania, lauded the Honors program at Pacific Union College for its contributions to his personal and intellectual development. Affirming that his sentiments toward the program are shared by a number of Honors classmates, he



**Above: Washington Adventist University faculty lay hands in blessing on graduating WAU Honors students during the 2009 Senior Dedication service.**

**Inset: Incoming freshman Honors students at Southern Adventist University participate in the Honors orientation ropes course at the school's outdoor education center.**

## A Personal Testimonial

“I graduated from Andrews [University] in May 2006. While I was at Andrews, I was part of the John Nevins Andrews Honors Program. While I appreciated numerous features of the program, there are two that really stand out to me. The first is the Italian study tour I participated in during the spring break of 2003. It was an amazing experience to be immersed in another culture for a little over a week. Under the direction of Dr. [Malcolm] Russell, we traveled from Milan to Venice to Rome to Florence. We visited various museums, churches, and historical sites, like the Coliseum, and we were even able to attend several concerts while there. As a young, impressionable freshman, I felt so blessed by this opportunity that participating in the Honors program provided me. Moreover, while on this trip, I was able to connect with individuals that I did not know as well before, thereby making friendships that provided me with a strong community throughout college.

“The second feature of the Honors program that I felt made the most impact for me was the whole process of creating a senior Honors thesis. The proposal process taught me to be confident in front of a committee evaluating both me and my ideas, a skill that has proved invaluable in graduate school as I pursue a doctoral degree at Northwestern University. The poster presentation allowed me to develop the skill of explaining my arguments to an interdisciplinary group, which I am still doing to this day as I apply for doctoral fellowships.

“Finally, composing the thesis itself taught me the difficulty of creating an articulate, sophisticated, interesting argument that intervenes in one’s critical discourse, yet at the same time it taught me the distinct pleasure that comes from stretching and strengthening one’s intellectual muscles. In fact, that thesis was my graduate school writing sample and was partially responsible for my acceptance at Northwestern, as was the independent study the Honors program allowed me to take which let me assist the current director, Dr. [L. Monique] Pittman, in teaching her Honors Literature and the Arts course. Thus, I can honestly say that I would not be where I am today, especially in my career, if it were not for the Honors program at Andrews. Its role in my education and personal development has been invaluable” (Vanessa Corredera, Ph.D. candidate, English Department, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois).

wrote, “You have no idea how many times the phrase, ‘I miss Honors’ has come up in our conversations.” Another student at Pacific Union College discussed the importance of acceptance by fellow students and teachers, which she said she had never felt in high school. She reported great joy at being able to sit down and “rip a topic apart” without having to define herself as “the nerd.”

Mike Tyler, a 2008 graduate of La Sierra University (Riverside, California), said that the greatest value of the university’s Honors program was the community of great thinkers it established. He wrote: “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—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.”

Kristin Denslow described how the Andrews University Honors program helped her connect socially with her colleagues. She tells how beach vespers, outings to plays, and community service activities enabled her to make many long-term friends. She wrote: “We learned to work together, to have fun together, and to support each other. I am eternally thankful for these opportunities and these friendships.”

### Varied Opportunities

On a different note, Joel Kurtz, a student at Southern Adventist University (Collegedale, Tennessee), wrote that he chose to participate in the Southern Scholars program because he

wanted an opportunity to take classes outside his majors. Southern Scholars allowed him to pursue his diverse interests in physics, caving, ancient literature, woodworking, and international relations. He said, "As a direct result of these experiences, I obtained a job in the Physics Department, I gained new friends, I learned how to rig a high line over a waterfall, I was challenged to formulate my personal ethical philosophy, and I also got to make a sweet set of turned wooden rolling pins."

The academic, spiritual, and social aspects of Adventist Honors education are like the three primary colors in a rainbow (red, yellow, and blue). Just as a person might prefer one of the primary colors or a gradient between the colors, an Honors student might prefer the academic, the spiritual, or the social aspects of

Honors or a combination thereof. A student eager for intellectual stimulation, spiritual nourishment, and a great group of friends will flourish in an Adventist Honors education. ✍



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It is also the goal of the coordinator, authors, and editor that this issue of the JOURNAL can be used to reach out to students in high school and college, and their parents, who are seeking an education from teachers touching eternity—students who are highly motivated to work hard, think critically, process synthetically, avoid shallowness, live wholistically, engage in civil discourse, serve others, and worship with integrity and enthusiasm. An additional goal is to explore the current state of Honors education in the North American Division in an effort to raise awareness about the needs of the church's gifted young people, to nudge church leadership toward a more profound commitment to provide a sustainable system of support for academic excellence and exploration, to attract students committed to high achievement, and to touch eternity through these fine students.

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**Douglas R. Clark, Ph.D.**, is Director of the Honors program at La Sierra University in Riverside, California, and Coordinator for

this special issue of the JOURNAL. The editorial staff wish to express their heartfelt appreciation for the many hours Dr. Clark devoted to defining topics and contacting potential authors, soliciting and assembling factual information about the various Honors programs, helping the editor obtain peer reviewers and review their recommendations; and throughout the entire planning and production process, cheerfully and promptly answering a myriad of questions and offering helpful advice.

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Acknowledgements—I wish to acknowledge in the writing, editing, and producing of this special issue of THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION the marvelous and manifold contributions of the authors (as listed); the directors of Honors programs throughout the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists; peer reviewers working behind the scenes; Beverly Robinson-Rumble, editor of the JOURNAL; and Debra Marovitch, secretary in the Honors office at La Sierra University who, with student helpers, collected much of the tabular data that appear in various places throughout the issue.—D.R.C.

An advertisement for the 'circle' website. On the left, a blue vertical banner contains the 'circle' logo (a stylized figure on a circle) and the text 'Join the circle to find curricula for Adventist early childhood education'. Below this is a dark brown bar with the website URL 'circle.adventist.org' and the tagline 'linking Christian educators anytime anywhere'. On the right, a photograph shows a woman in a white outfit running happily in a grassy field with two young boys in green shirts running alongside her, holding hands.