

Tradition and Change

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Honors programs, like the institutions that host them, need to exercise constant re-examination to remain effective and to serve their students the best they can. As a private, liberal arts institution, in the tradition of the Irish Catholic Christian Brothers, Iona College provides many avenues to enhance student learning, and paramount to our ability to offer a differential learning experience for our students is the cultivation of a robust honors program. When Iona first began developing its honors program in 1958, the program was “designed to aid the superior student in receiving the fullest possible benefit from the intellectual and cultural resources of the College.” While these sentiments continue to hold true, the ever-changing dynamics of higher education have resulted in multiple transformations and enhancements of the honors program since 1958, including a heightened focus over the past several years.

In 2011, a representative steering group was charged with developing a college-wide, five-year strategic plan—Advancing our Legacy, Defining our Future—that calls on the community to advance the college in six major areas,

including student distinction. One goal of the plan is to “Revise the Honors Program to be distinctive and innovative, and to attract high-achieving students to Iona College, with an increasing percentage of each incoming class being served by the Honors Program” as well as to “Examine the feasibility of student-designed majors and options for disciplinary and interdisciplinary tracks; [and] reaffirm the humanities base while strengthening the science, technology, and math components.”

Our faculty and staff who led the steering group readily recognized the value of the honors program in attracting and retaining exceptional students to our college. Through this program we are able to academically challenge and inspire motivated students through a stimulating and creative curriculum. The Iona Honors Program boasts a dedication to the centrality of reasoned discussion and active learning; the deliberate inclusion of both specialization and breadth in education; and the careful balancing of the needs of the “superior student” as an individual with those of the larger communities of which s/he is a vital member.

The cultivation of this program has resulted in an outstanding experience for our students and for the faculty who work with them each day. This past spring I was fortunate to attend one of my favorite campus events, the annual “Honors Thesis Day.” Our students presented on a wide range of topics, highlighting the many avenues they were able to explore during their time at Iona. For example, Ryan DelMonaco, presented “Complexity vs. Formulation: An Exploration of Sports Scheduling through the Use of Graph Theory and Linear Programming,” and Michelle Muzzio presented “Advances of the Droplet Interface Bilayer (DIB): Modeling the Biological Membrane and Beyond.”

Our honors program allows students to be as creative and inquisitive as their imaginations will allow and is essential to elevating our student experience. The four-semester Honors Humanities Seminar is a great books seminar running from antiquity to our post-modern world and focused on improving our students’ abilities to analyze ideas in increasingly subtle prose. This seminar reaffirms our commitment to the humanities and remains the center of the curriculum as a unifying, academic experience for our honors students.

As we continue to refine our honors program and its curriculum to include student-designed majors, service and experiential learning, and study abroad components, we hold true to centering our vision on the humanities, from antiquity to the present, as it is expressed in the Catholic intellectual

tradition, grounding our honors students in the tradition at the same time that we prepare them for careers in our contemporary world.

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