

Tradition and Innovation

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Honors programs and colleges are sources of innovation and risk-taking, but they often maintain some roots in the origins of their home institutions. From its founding in 1913, when a small group of businessmen gathered to formally study business, to 2015 when that Evening School of Commerce had grown to a vibrant 32,000-student research university with students from every state in the nation and most countries in the world, Georgia State University has consistently displayed an enterprising and independent spirit along with a staunch commitment to ensuring that students from all backgrounds can achieve their academic and career goals. The GSU Honors College, established in 2011, is a vital part of this mission, a place where the most intellectually curious and intensely motivated undergraduates explore a challenging interdisciplinary curriculum, engage with outstanding faculty, conduct research with top scientists and scholars, and graduate ready to embark on a lifetime of achievement.

Many honors colleges offer the qualities of a liberal arts atmosphere within a larger research university; an honors education, however, must

encompass more than just classroom and lab experiences. The honors experience at Georgia State is the product of synergistic, integrative experiences that connect the college and the university to the Atlanta community and the rest of the world. An honors education emphasizes risk-taking, creativity, intellectual entrepreneurship, and adventurousness that those long-ago night school students would certainly recognize. Our honors college is a laboratory known for embracing new initiatives, experimenting with curriculum, and encouraging the kinds of outside-the-classroom experiences that drive personal growth and accomplishment.

This past summer, I led a team of students on a climb of Mount Baker in Washington, a challenging experience for us all. The group drew on previously undiscovered resources, overcame obstacles, and pushed themselves far out of their comfort zones. We all returned the richer and wiser for the struggle and effort. So, too, does the honors student push his or her intellectual boundaries to enroll in the honors college's interdisciplinary seminars like The Concept of Zero, Living and Serving with Homeless People, and The Integration of Technology, Pedagogy and Philosophy. Full of curious students from dozens of degree programs, these seminars push students to examine their worldviews, banish complacency, and challenge themselves to move beyond their chemistry or art classes to embrace what might be uncomfortable or difficult. The view from the top of the mountain, at the end of the long climb, is worth the struggle and effort, but the journey up is where we discover who we are and what we're capable of.

Recently, the honors college offered a seminar on the legacy of Alonzo F. Herndon, in which honors students both learned about risks and took a few themselves. Atlanta's role as the center of the Civil Rights Movement makes it an ideal laboratory for honors students to study vital, present-day, human rights issues. Notably, not one student enrolled in the course was a history major. The students—who came from neuroscience, film, art and design, marketing, psychology—left their comfort zones to crawl through property records, dust off archival documents, and learn new ways of developing knowledge. Initially wary of how their research would come together and how it would be used in this experimental seminar, students learned to become comfortable with ambiguity and allowed an organic process to lead the course. The professors who taught the course, one historian and one community psychologist, modeled risk taking: not knowing how well students would embrace the fluidity of the course and tolerating uncertainty of the course's outcome.

Honors faculty certainly don't shirk the challenges and opportunities of twenty-first-century education and are ready to push themselves out of their comfort zones as well. A dedicated group of them are piloting the Digital Literacy Initiative in the honors college and incorporating new tools, techniques, and projects into the core honors curriculum. They're examining their preconceived notions of what a history or English course must look like and adding visualization, mapping, and coding to their curricular plans.

While an honors education often begins in the classroom, where high-achieving students feel safe and comfortable, the LEAD with Honors Certificate program, which cultivates leadership skills and abilities, doesn't end there. Beginning with a seminar in leadership during which students interact with leaders across many Atlanta sectors and continuing with practical opportunities and courses to further leadership skills, the program culminates in a year-long internship followed by a thesis related to a leadership issue encountered during the internship. This combination of coursework, practical skill development, work experience, soft skills, and research moves students far beyond the four walls of a classroom and is well worth the journey.

Not just beyond the classroom, an honors education is an experience beyond university boundaries. National and international conferences for presentation of research, internships in town and abroad, summer research programs and service opportunities: all are valuable additions to an undergraduate education and offer students the opportunity to experience the world from a different perspective. Honors students who take advantage of these opportunities learn to solve problems, think critically, and embrace a global mindset, all qualities that prepare them for the years after college.

The value of an honors education is more demonstrable today than ever before. By combining the best aspects of a more traditional liberal education with the applied practice of skills and experiences, the honors college gives students the ability to put their knowledge to work in the world. The challenges students face as they attempt difficult or uncomfortable tasks help them build and then use the real-world skills they'll need when they come up against obstacles in their lives after college. Their adventures—whether in graduate school, service for a non-profit, or a career—have already, confidently, begun.

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