

Transformation from Within

JAKE B. SCHRUM, PRESIDENT

Emory & Henry College

HONORS DIRECTOR: JOE LANE

As a college president for over twenty years, it has not escaped my attention that sometimes investments in an honors program or college are decried as “elitist”: as unnecessary investments in already privileged students with little wider institutional payoff. We have heard the familiar refrain at Emory & Henry at times, but our work building on, expanding, and constantly revisiting and revising the pedagogical innovations that come out of our honors program refutes the idea that this work benefits only a few. Our college has demonstrated that honors, far from being elitist, benefits all the students on campus.

The faculty of Emory & Henry College established the honors program in 2009 to provide an enhanced academic experience for the college’s best students. The program inducted its first class of sixteen students in the fall of 2009, and the first cohort graduated with College Honors Diplomas in May of 2013. I arrived at Emory & Henry soon thereafter in August 2013, when the honors program was already establishing itself as a success. In fact, Kyle Boden—an honors student, a double-major in biology and chemistry, and

quarterback and captain of the football team—was a member of the search committee that selected me. Imagine my delight at getting to announce at my very first Board of Trustees meeting that, thanks in part to the advising provided by the honors program, Kyle was selected as Emory & Henry’s first Rhodes Scholar finalist in a hundred years.

The faculty had several goals in establishing the honors program. The founding documents of the program name several of them:

- **Increase** the college’s population of exceptionally talented, intellectually curious students.
- **Provide** those students with special experiences, a more flexible and challenging core curriculum, intense academic advising, and intellectual challenges that will retain them at Emory & Henry through graduation.
- **Challenge** our intellectually talented students to exercise their curiosity and to design their own courses, internships, and learning experiences.
- **Place** our scholars in a challenging cohort of similarly ambitious students who will push each other to do their very best work.
- **Encourage** students to take what they are learning at Emory & Henry out into the world and to bring what they learn out in the world back to share at Emory & Henry.
- **Provide opportunities** for students to engage with Emory & Henry’s premier faculty by placing some of the best teachers in the country in small, cohort classes with the best students in our region.

When I arrived, the data suggested that we were succeeding in those goals. Where Emory & Henry had struggled in the mid-2000s to maintain our national test score averages, the academic profile of our top quartile stabilized and started to rise. Where we had recently suffered high attrition among our top academic performers, honors students were now persisting at the college at nearly a 95% four-year graduation rate. The intellectual energy and accolades they were bringing Emory & Henry were noticeable on any walk across campus and in the pages of our alumni magazine and admissions materials. Our honors scholars were studying abroad in record numbers and presenting their work in undergraduate research forums as well as at professional meetings. Their seminars were fast-evolving into dynamic and cooperative

workshops in which students were playing the lead role in selecting questions and problems to study and in reaching out to draw a wide circle of faculty into complex, sometimes heated, discussions of multidisciplinary problems that might have been neglected by individual major-focused departments.

All of these successes might make for a vibrant and exciting honors program, but if these educational benefits were limited to a select group of students, we would have missed much of the value of what was happening. Fortunately, though, the conversations spread across our campus, and ultimately the honors program performed a more profound service for Emory & Henry that was perhaps not expected at all.

When I became president in 2013, I convened a group of faculty, trustees, alumni, and staff to talk about what made Emory & Henry distinctive and special. That group kept returning to our ability to help students realize their ambitions and “be the change they want to see in the world.” Many of the same student exemplars were discussed in meeting after meeting as examples of what E&H did best.

Colin Christensen brought a terrible personal tragedy to college: a friend had been fatally shot in a tragic accident. Colin organized his concerns about gun violence into the core of his college education, helping to organize a new major (philosophy, politics, and economics) to gather the information he needed to understand and solve this complex problem. He founded a non-profit organization to help deal with the causes and consequences of gun violence in the commonwealth, wrote a law review article on new developments in second amendment law, and ultimately enrolled in a prestigious joint JD/PhD program with the goal of becoming the world’s foremost expert on the laws of gun ownership and use.

Ruthann Froberg came to college reeling from a beloved grandmother’s descent into Alzheimer’s dementia. Ruthann’s efforts to deal with this family tragedy led her to study pre-medicine, but she also explored the consequences of the growing prevalence of dementia in other ways as well. She wrote essays on how the horror of losing our minds is explored in the popular genre of zombie movies and on the sociological consequences of eldercare for families. Soon, inspired by discovering Andrew Solomon’s *Far from the Tree*, she was working on a major multimedia project on the ways our awareness of and fears about dementia permeate our modern lives, a project that was advanced by papers, posters, and interviews produced in multiple classes on everything from biology to Coleridge.

Ali Hillman followed her interest in autism to bring a new and unexpected section of readings and discussions into her first-year honors seminar *Meanings, Minds, and Moralities*. She worked with a number of professors to design her own major in cross-cultural psychology and constructed her own study abroad experience to advance an honors thesis on the ways that different cultures understand and celebrate neurodiversity.

We discovered that what all these students had in common was their participation in the honors program. In our campus-wide conversations, the honors program proved to be one of the key inspirations for our Big Idea: an institutional initiative that we call “Project Ampersand.” The honors program was, it turns out, serving as a laboratory that incubated new approaches to education and pedagogy, providing the college with prototypes for constructing classes where student interests direct new approaches to classic texts as well as advising student research and activism. As we began to talk about facilitating, funding, and assessing long-term projects and tangible results that might not be neatly contained in one-semester classes, we decided to expand on models that the honors program had pioneered and to find new ways to integrate internships into the curriculum as an essential part of classroom learning, not a temporary break from it.

David Haney, Dean of Faculty, sometimes refers to Project Ampersand’s ambitious goals for bringing project-based learning to our general population as “mainstreaming the Honors Program.” In providing some resources and a great deal of flexibility to our best students through the honors program, we allowed noteworthy examples of what our students and faculty do best to rise to the surface and be recognized. In the process, we rediscovered and rededicated ourselves to the real purpose of institutions like Emory & Henry.

We tell students to ask themselves big questions and to invest themselves in finding answers to them: in both ancient texts and modern experiments, in both semester-long studies and in multi-year research forays, in both the classrooms where we study and the communities where we live.

In fact, two of the exemplary honors students whom we cited earlier joined several of their peers in honors to create their own course in which students are inviting a wide range of guest lecturers on the topic “Global Health Care and Culture” to campus. This course is being partially funded by a Mellon Foundation planning grant that we have received for Project Ampersand. Each week a new expert on the intersections of modern health care and the cultural dimensions of our interconnected world speaks to the class, sometimes in person but often by Skype. The students identify the speakers they

want, invite them to campus, and make the arrangements for their visits. When possible, our guest speakers have dinner with the class participants before speaking to a broader campus audience. Meanwhile, the students each work with their faculty advisor to complete an individualized research project that reflects their career interests in healthcare while drawing on the expertise of both faculty members and guest lecturers. We are actively monitoring this class as a model for more innovative seminars to come. We think it offers a template for rethinking courses across our curriculum to better challenge our students and to connect them to the contacts they need to succeed in graduate school and their professions.

Another example of seeding curricular innovation comes from the program's Internship Initiative Program. In its early stages, the honors program worked to match honors students with mentors from our Board of Trustees. Business majors were matched with successful entrepreneurs; prelaw scholars clerked with sitting federal judges; aspiring diplomats shadowed a corporate vice president of intergovernmental affairs on his trips to speak with the European Union Parliament. Now, as part of Project Ampersand, we have begun building a database of all our alumni that is sortable by a wide range of professional experiences and avocational interests. As students undertake research or community service projects in their particular areas of study, this database will allow us to facilitate a wide range of internships, externships, and mentorships for students across campus. Once again, an honors program initiative revealed valuable opportunities that we could scale up to advance the education of all of our students.

Our honors program has made it possible for us to raise the level of discussion in classes across the curriculum and has revealed opportunities for investing all of our students in projects that will widen their horizons and allow them to contribute to positive social change. Honors education at Emory & Henry has created a commitment to re-energizing the liberal arts for solving modern problems and to challenging all of our students to see how they can make their world a better place. In doing well what we do best, and often doing it first, the honors program has become a prototype for our college's core curriculum and a source for inspiration to departments, professors, administrators, and students across our campus.

President Schrum may be contacted at
jschrum@ehc.edu.