

Striving for Our Best and Brightest Selves: Making Honors Central to the Campus Community

STEVE MORGAN, PRESIDENT

Westminster College

HONORS DIRECTOR: RICHARD BADENHAUSEN

Honors education in the United States got its start almost a century ago when Frank Aydelotte became president of Swarthmore in 1921 and introduced a then-radical curriculum for juniors and seniors that emphasized active learning, critical thinking, and interdisciplinarity (Rinn 70–3). Informed by his experience as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, Aydelotte believed that a specially designed curriculum for high-achieving students would push such students intellectually and yield positive learning outcomes. Aydelotte’s brainchild has proved wildly successful, so much so that the National Collegiate Honors Council can point to over 800 institutional members on the eve of its fiftieth anniversary.

In spite of the popularity of this model, some critics have objected to honors education as elitist, mere special treatment for a class of already privileged

students. On one level, I can understand this perception, especially given the recruiting model employed by some honors programs and colleges that emphasizes “perks” as a way of enticing high-achieving students to attend their institutions. Priority registration, book stipends, full tuition waivers, and lush honors dorms that physically remove students from the general population certainly give the impression that honors students reside in a separate sphere and are, according to University of Florida Honors director Kevin Knudson, “flying first class.” Criticizing this climate of entitlement, Knudson calls for an alternative model where we are “engaging students who want to push the boundaries and helping them find ways to do it, rather than providing further empty rewards for students who jump through hoops with style.”

I am pleased to say that at Westminster College we do not depend on any of these perks to attract our students. Instead of framing honors around the idea of a “better” experience, whatever that might mean, we speak of honors as “different,” an alternative learning opportunity that offers students attracted to interdisciplinary, seminar-style learning a place to stretch themselves with other like-minded individuals. We have many unique academic programs at the college—an innovative, May-term, study-away program; a portfolio of low-residency and competency-based options; an outdoor leadership curriculum; and even an aviation degree, among many others—each serving a class of students that has special interests and needs. Honors fits right in with that larger institutional philosophy.

The approach that Knudson calls for seems to be working at Westminster. The fall 2014 entering honors class was drawn from the largest applicant pool in the program’s almost three-decade history. Far from focusing on perks, 68% of these entering students claimed it was the interesting honors curriculum that caused them to submit an application. As for the larger applicant pool itself, the top reason students tend to apply to our honors program is the rigor of the program: students want to challenge themselves. This fact is especially heartening in light of a recent book on the science of successful learning demonstrating that “[I]earning is deeper and more durable when it’s *effortful*. . . . [W]hen learning is harder, it’s stronger and lasts longer” (Brown 3, 9).

Far from being elitist, honors at Westminster plays a crucial role in providing opportunity and access. As Scott Carnicom points out, honors “has historically been an *antidote* for elitism, democratically leveling the playing field and providing a top-notch education to students outside the hallowed halls of the oldest and/or most prestigious institutions” (51, my emphasis). While a number of elite institutions like Washington University have been

taken to task recently for the paltry number of low-income students they serve, our college seeks out such students in the belief that we have a moral obligation to provide educational opportunities for individuals of all backgrounds. During the 2014–2015 academic year, 27% of Westminster undergraduates were Pell grant recipients, students who come from the lowest income group in the country, and the large majority of our students have significant financial need. Honors students are no different: they typically have roughly the same amount of need as the entering class they are part of. While Andrew Delbanco has recently lamented in *The New York Review of Books* that highly selective universities enroll only 5% of students from the bottom income quartile of our society, “reflect[ing] the stratification of our society more than resisting it” (38, 39), I am proud that Westminster sees social mobility as an important part of its mission.

Westminster has also enjoyed recognition for its advocacy work with students from underrepresented groups. We have helped design innovative outreach efforts through our Venture and Clemente programs, have been singled out for the past two years for work with the low-income South Salt Lake area as its “Partner of the Year,” and have housed a very successful McNair Scholars program at the college, to name just three efforts. Belying the ugly myth that diversity and academic excellence are mutually exclusive, 19% of Westminster McNair Scholars have been drawn from the honors program over the past eight years even though honors students represent only 7% of the student body as a whole.

Honors programs bring a wide variety of benefits to campus, some of which are obvious and others that are less so. Many students who might not otherwise know about an institution or consider applying learn of it or matriculate specifically because of the honors opportunity. For example, for 83% of last year’s entering honors class, acceptance into honors was important or very important to their decision to attend Westminster. Honors students typically retain and persist at higher rates than the overall student population and thus are a good investment for the college. Honors also attracts student leaders to campus who spread out across all our programs and provide lifting power to clubs, sports teams, and other organizations. At Westminster, such students have played especially prominent roles in our service efforts and leadership positions. Although they make up a small fraction of the student body, these students have won a remarkable 50% of the two major commencement awards for character and leadership over the past dozen years.

Honors can also have many positive effects that are less visible. Our honors seminars are all team-taught, and the collaborative setting forces faculty to stretch themselves not only by reading outside their disciplinary fields but by constantly trying new teaching strategies and by getting feedback from a teaching partner after every class. All three of the finalists for our college's Excellence in Teaching Award in 2015 had significant experience teaching in honors, and each of these faculty members mentioned in their finalist interview how honors had improved their teaching in all their classes. Writing in the program newsletter a few years ago, gifted math faculty member Richard Wellman noted, "Since I began teaching in the Honors program, I've incorporated more discussions into all of my classes and I have learned to talk less and listen more" (9). Another important benefit is that honors can be used by savvy marketing departments to associate the college's brand with academic excellence, a strategy that public institutions with honors colleges have employed with special effectiveness. Finally, as the National Collegiate Honors Council's "Basic Characteristics" suggest, honors can be a laboratory for curricular and pedagogical experimentation, work that can "serve as prototypes for initiatives that can become institutionalized across the campus" (Characteristic #13). At Westminster, we are about to bring online an exciting new general education program that replicates the honors model in cross-disciplinary opportunities and, in places, team-teaching.

Given how crowded the higher education space is right now, institutions that are able to differentiate their honors programs according to learning opportunities rather than perks will excel in the long term. A college that chooses the perks route can only differentiate the amount of "stuff" offered to prospective high-achieving students. The natural result is an escalating arms race in which each institution seeks to outbid the other; this approach does not make good business sense, nor is it sustainable. A more strategic approach is to shape honors around a specific learning design—a curriculum focused on global issues, civic engagement, leadership, or interdisciplinary learning, as is the case at Westminster—and then educate families during the recruiting process so that students know exactly what they are getting into. This transparency in the admissions process will translate into higher retention and satisfaction among high-achieving graduates, who someday may return to the college to help as active alumni or even trustees.

In his fine lead essay, Jim Herbert eloquently recounts calling on his honors training to solve challenging "real world" assignments at the College Board and the National Endowment for the Humanities. I know the graduates of

our honors program have had similar experiences, like a recent economics major who went straight from Westminster to Stanford's MBA program and was surprised to find that his first-year class ran much along the lines of his freshman honors humanities seminar. On finishing his graduate degree, he began work at Amazon.com, one of the most writing-centric companies in the world, where he drew on his honors training of weekly writing prompts to succeed in an environment where CEO Jeff Bezos started meetings by having executives read and comment on written proposals.

Herbert's essay also demonstrates that we have come a long way in higher education on the question of demonstrating what our students have learned. While he references the struggles of the College Board to agree on basic academic competencies that students should master, most institutions now engage in those conversations as part of their regular annual assessment efforts. At Westminster, our college-wide learning goals drive everything we do, and students cannot graduate from the college without completing an extensive eportfolio in which they demonstrate achievement of the various competencies through learning artifacts and reflective essays. During a recent curriculum revision, the honors program revised its learning outcomes so that they were nested under the college-wide learning goals, thus allowing students to see even more explicitly how their honors experiences connect to the larger learning goals of the college. Again, honors can be most valuable when it positions itself not as separate from the rest of the campus but as intimately tied to the institution's mission.

Herbert ends his essay on an optimistic note, and I'd like to follow his lead in my own conclusion. He suggests that what is perhaps most important about his experience in honors is the intellectual commonality that can be achieved when individuals who take different positions come together to work through these differences. "That we all can think and rethink another's thought," he writes, "is what I learned in honors education and what turned out to be essential in my work." Such rethinking because we see anew through the eyes of others is perhaps the most valuable asset we provide in education; it complicates and deepens our beliefs, forces us to see the world for the complex place it is, and helps us develop empathy for others. This is the true value of a liberal education at colleges like Westminster. As we often do at Westminster, I will give our students the last word by quoting a reflection in an exit survey from a recent honors graduate, who commented on the worth of her experience: "I have met a host of interesting people who force me to be my best, brightest self, to constantly stand at intellectual attention."

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President Morgan may be contacted at
smorgan@westminstercollege.edu.