

## Seeking and Learning

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Every year we tell our students at the annual new student convocation to work hard, stay focused, and push themselves; if they follow that simple advice, they will soon be participating in our commencement program as proud graduates of Illinois Valley Community College (IVCC). By the same token, if college personnel do not challenge themselves to think critically and subscribe to the principles of continuous quality improvement—always striving to be better tomorrow than we were today—then we can hardly expect our students to excel in college, much less in a global market where other countries are surpassing the United States in degree attainment.

The IVCC Honors Program mission is to “promote the identification and achievement of education and/or career goals for its participants by offering specially designed honors curriculum, by providing stimulating academic and social program events, and by facilitating and recognizing student pursuits in community involvement, campus leadership, and experiential learning.” Most students join the honors program to gain more than a traditional college experience. As a community of educators at IVCC, we are convinced that

our honors program is a great first step for those students who want to excel in college and beyond. Members enjoy personalized attention from talented and dedicated instructors—the hallmark of our institution—who challenge their students to get involved in a variety of active-learning experiences.

Additional benefits include “tuition waivers, career guidance, resume boosters, enriched course work, field trips, recognition at graduation and on transcripts, collegiality with honors peers, personal exploration, [and] transfer opportunities.” As a result of these practical benefits, enrollment in the IVCC Honors Program has doubled over the last few years, a significant statistic when one considers that enrollments across the college (across the state and nation, too), have been in a downward spiral for the last three years.

Since 1924, the college’s reputation for providing affordable, high-quality, in-demand programs and services has been consistent, resulting in over 30,000 graduates being well-served. Each year’s incoming class includes many of the district’s top-tier students, and the honors program provides them with an opportunity to continue to challenge themselves academically and contribute to the community in the process. Our message for quality is being heard, often resulting in gifted students making the wise choice to attend IVCC before moving on to a university. This fall semester, the incoming class includes 5 valedictorians, 1 salutatorian, and 1 student in the top 2% of her class. Over the past eight years, we have successfully recruited 38 valedictorians, 25 salutatorians and 13 students in the top 2% of their class. Once apprised of the opportunity, academically gifted students enroll in our honors program because they want something more than just a degree.

In order to earn honors recognition, students must complete four honors courses: Honors Orientation, Honors Project, Honors Portfolio, and a general-education course designated as an honors section. Students complete coursework and at least one service-learning capstone project. The students’ successes are celebrated each semester at a campus-wide Honorspalooza event. An example of a recent capstone project that was showcased for the college community involved a group of students who wanted to know how to improve childhood literacy rates. These students discovered that the best way to increase literacy was to get books into the hands of youth in economically disadvantaged homes. They held a highly successful book drive and then donated over 600 children’s books to Bernie’s Book Bank, a charitable organization that provides literature to children in low-income communities.

Another project involved a group of students investigating drug use among college students. They discovered that, while Drug Abuse Resistance

Education (D.A.R.E.) and similar programs are common in K–12 settings, the focus on drug education tends to decrease in higher education. To solve this problem at IVCC, the team wrote and distributed pamphlets about the dangers of drugs to their peers across campus, and they created a sign featuring a promise not to do drugs that many students, staff, and faculty signed. One of our local papers learned of this team's project and featured a story about it on the front page.

One final example of the many such projects conducted by honors students involved a student who wanted to study spectrometry in depth for his Honors General Chemistry I course. He built a spectrometer, a device for measuring light, and planned to donate it to an impoverished school in Africa. Projects like these teach students that there is more to a college education than academics. They can and should use college to develop career and educational goals, but under ideal conditions, the experience of a higher education would also enable students to view themselves as important members of their communities who can make a positive impact on the world, and this is what our honors program helps students to achieve.

The IVCC Honors Program is a source of pride for the institution. Our honors faculty and students are alike in a number of ways: they have high expectations of themselves and others; they are highly engaged in the campus community; they are critical thinkers who enjoy working together to solve problems; and, rather than asking what's in it for them, they aspire to share their knowledge with others for the betterment of society. Both students and faculty in the program are transformational leaders with a shared vision and common goals. The honors program complements the college's mission statement: IVCC teaches those who seek and is enriched by those who learn.

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