

Enriching the Life of the Community On and Off Campus

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INTRODUCTION

According to the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), “The value of Honors programs and Honors colleges for students cannot be overemphasized. For high achieving students, Honors programs and colleges offer many opportunities to make the most of their higher education.” Many faculty and administrators who have spent their careers in higher education would concur with NCHC’s assessment. Honors colleges and programs throughout the country have historically offered significant value to those who participate. From learning critical-thinking skills to developing exceptional written and verbal communication skills and deep connections with professors and peers, students benefit greatly from their honors experiences and often leave higher educational institutions with higher aspirations for life after college than many of their peers (Hafsyan).

While colleges and universities have instituted honors colleges and programs for a number of these reasons, many have yet to consider the value that these programs hold outside the confines of the classroom and for those students who participate. At Valparaiso University, Christ College (our honors college) serves students both within and beyond the college. Christ College (CC) also engages community members and alumni, providing comprehensive value to both the university and the greater community. Additionally, CC bolsters the university's mission and vision in rich and fulfilling ways. Using Christ College as an example, I will describe the ways in which Valpo achieves these results in order to underscore the value of honors programs beyond the classroom.

CHRIST COLLEGE: A BRIEF HISTORY

Founded in 1859, Valparaiso University is an independent Lutheran university grounded in the liberal arts tradition and located in Northwest Indiana just an hour east of Chicago. In 1958, the earliest version of Christ College was instituted during a time when many universities initiated similar colleges and programs after the launch of a national conversation generated by the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (Andrews). Modeled after programs at Oxford and Cambridge, Christ College invited incoming freshmen to join the honors program, where they engaged in advanced, more rigorous versions of required freshman courses such as Western Civilization, English, and Theology (Baepler). Eventually, CC evolved into much more than a program and was founded as an autonomous honors college within the university that provided students with an interdisciplinary approach to higher learning.

Nearly fifty years after its inception, Christ College remains a top honors college with a rigorous curriculum grounded in student-centered learning, fulfilling former President O. P. Kretzmann's originating vision to "take heed of the emerging national student protests against the bureaucratization of learning by shaking off curricular straightjackets and discovering new, personal methods of learning" (Baepler 36).

Christ College models this student-centered approach in several ways. While in the classroom, students engage not only with classical texts but also in independent research tailored to their interests and courses of study. Outside of the traditional classroom setting, CC students participate in a variety of experiential learning opportunities that enhance their growth and discovery and that contribute meaningfully to the community at large.

In 1991, the dean of Christ College founded the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts at Valparaiso University, bringing to campus recent post-doctoral academicians annually to teach and do research during two-year residencies. These young scholars teach in Christ College and in their disciplines, bringing cutting-edge perspectives to students and faculty colleagues.

Christ College's intentional and distinctive approach to higher learning and its exceptional faculty serve to enhance the university's mission to prepare women and men who will lead and serve in church and society while also enhancing the liberal arts tradition upon which the university was founded. While CC serves this purpose for the students enrolled, the college also extends these foundational values into the community at large.

COMMUNITY-WIDE EVENTS: A BENEFIT TO THE LOCAL AND CAMPUS COMMUNITY

During the first semester of the honors program, CC students explore great works of history, literature, drama, philosophy, and religion through critical reading and close analysis of texts as well as careful and focused research and writing, scholarly lectures, faculty-guided small-group discussion, formal public debate, and creative, dramatic, and musical expression.

In order to cultivate learning via dramatic and musical expression, students participate in the weekly Freshman Program Drama Workshop, during which they write, stage, and perform an original ninety-minute theatre piece, accompanied by music, based on themes from their coursework. The Christ College Freshman Production is then performed for members of the campus community and the general public annually in the late fall. The experience inspires innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to learning, and it also allows a unique way for the larger campus and the general public to interact with the college.

In addition, for the past thirty years, CC has offered the Christ College Symposium. Each week, evening events feature exemplary scholars, artists, and public intellectuals who address a common theme in the context of their own disciplinary perspective. And now in its third year, Shakespeare Week, hosted by Christ College in partnership with the English and theatre departments, showcases a series of performances, workshops, and other events relating to various Shakespeare works. These and many other CC co-curricular experiences offer, in the words of the current CC dean, Peter Kanelos, "a model for infusing an ethos of inquiry and exploration throughout the entire student experience."

Most of these events are open to the community, and they allow students and the public alike to consider classical and contemporary works in concert with one another. This kind of collaborative interaction and learning enhances both the college and the wider university and local community, and it serves to support the mission and vision of the university, which aims to bring diverse people together in the common pursuit of truth (Heckler).

THE BENEFIT TO NON-HONORS STUDENTS

Christ College also adds value to the wider student population that interacts daily with students in the program. As an intentional component of the Christ College curriculum, CC students take the majority of their coursework outside the confines of the college. Along with earning honors distinction, students concurrently enroll in another college at the university—the College of Arts and Sciences, Business, Engineering, or Nursing and Health Professions—where they pursue a major area of study and earn their bachelor's degrees. While some of their courses in departments outside the college are cross-listed for honors credit, most are not.

When Christ College students collaborate and interact with students from all areas of study, it enhances both their own experience and the experience of students who are not enrolled in the honors program. It provides value to the honors students as they gain new perspectives from a heterogeneous population of students with whom they would not customarily interact. In turn, the larger student population benefits by witnessing, and often adopting, the honors students' exemplary critical-thinking and research skills as well as the thoughtfulness and discipline with which they approach academic material. This interaction elevates the overall academic experience for the entire student population as CC and non-CC students alike collaborate to develop concrete skills that they will take with them into their careers.

ALUMNI/AE PARTICIPATION: ADDING VALUE BEYOND GRADUATION

One of the indisputable benefits of most honors colleges and programs is the camaraderie it provides among enrolled students as well as the faculty with whom they interact. Many Christ College students, for example, develop deep relationships with their CC classmates and faculty mentors, and often these relationships extend beyond graduation. Christ College alumni reading groups in several major metropolitan areas convene to follow syllabi prepared

by faculty as guides to topics such as *What Is Beauty?*, *American Consumer Culture*, *Strangers and Journeys*, *Faith and Skepticism*, or *The Lincolns*. CC has also launched a continuing education program that attracts area alumni and others to discussions of masterworks. This ongoing value encourages a virtuous cycle of alumni/ae engagement and investment, and the combination of intellectual and social stimulation engenders an affinity with the college and university that other colleges sometimes struggle to match. Honors students who have experiences that keep them engaged with the university are more likely to be engaged in their workplace and as alumni/ae (Gallup/Purdue University).

According to a report by *The Alumni Factor*, friendship and intellectual capability are the most significant outcomes that influence alumni/ae to give back to their alma mater. Because honors colleges such as Christ College develop both intellectual and social bonds, a strong correlation between participation in the college and annual giving seems only natural. At Valpo, 20.6% of Christ College alumni gave back to the university in fiscal year 2015, compared to the 17.1% of alumni overall, and 10.4% of alumni gave back to the Christ College dedicated dean's fund compared to an average of 3.7% of alumni across all other colleges' deans' funds.

Given these statistics, the phrase "value of honors" is both figurative and literal. While colleges like Christ College continue to build universities' reputations for promoting rigorous academic inquiry, they also serve to enhance relationships with graduates, leading to opportunities for donor investment and greater financial sustainability. For Valpo, this type of engagement and financial potential plays a role in fulfilling the university's vision to remain financially prudent as we seek to prepare women and men to lead and serve for centuries to come, as articulated in the university's strategic plan (Heckler).

CONCLUSION

From critical analysis of theories and practices to student-centered learning, community engagement, campus-wide enrichment, and stronger affinity with the university post-graduation, Christ College provides a rich example of the value of honors. As we have shifted into a post-secondary landscape in which learning outcomes, alumni/ae and community engagement, and return on investment are of increasing importance (Hayword), universities and colleges across the country are well-served by the comprehensive value of honors programs and the role they play in enriching the entire university community and beyond.

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