

Access, not Exclusion: Honors at a Public Institution

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Itend to joke with our Dean of the Honors College, Ken Blemings, that his main goal is to work himself out of a job. Sorry, Ken.

After all, it is in our nature as agents of higher education to recruit, retain, and graduate the best and brightest talent available. In other words, every student walking onto our campus ought to be honors caliber. Likewise, the overall college experience for every student ought to be honors quality. I have been around the block for the last thirty-plus years serving as president of five major institutions in the United States, and I can affirm that the increased value placed on an honors education is enriching entire universities and how they operate. We are witnessing a shift in the way we prepare the next great generation of thinkers and doers, thanks to the high standards that the Honors College at West Virginia University and at other campuses across the nation have established.

Speaking for West Virginia University, a public, research, land-grant institution, I can attest to the following strengths of an honors program:

1. It increases the intellectual climate of the university.
2. It recognizes high-achieving students and their potential impact in the region and state.
3. It pairs outstanding teachers with small groups of students.
4. It teaches critical and reflective practices.
5. It is interdisciplinary, blending all varieties of students together from the arts to the sciences.

This effect is visible even to the general masses. In a piece called “A Prudent College Path” (8 Aug. 2015), *New York Times* op-ed columnist Frank Bruni highlighted how honors programs at public universities are luring top-notch students away from the elitist Ivy Leagues. A lower price tag is one reason. Here is another outlined in Bruni’s column: honors programs promise a more inclusive environment of devoted, highly driven students within an even more diverse campus population.

When honors colleges deliver on their promises, they are being anti-elitist. I know that many honors colleges and programs struggle with perceptions of elitism on their campuses, but we should never mistake an elite education for an elitist one. When you look at it from a different angle, at the way a strong honors college or program can affect the whole campus, especially one with a mission for access and service, you get a different result.

The obvious way that honors colleges are about access is that they give individual students access to the kind of educational opportunities and environment that they might not have been able to afford otherwise. Just look at the unorthodox yet thought-provoking approaches taken by a WVU Honors College instructor, Kevin Gooding. Also a Methodist pastor, Gooding teaches a small class exclusively for honors students on the Salem witch trials. At the beginning of each semester, Gooding’s students choose one of the accused Salem witches and study her trial. One student discovered that one of her ancestors was accused by her own children of witchcraft and was executed on August 19, 1692. Had the student not taken that class, she might have never known that sobering yet fascinating fact of her family history.

No, the Salem witch trials course is not just another class. Nor can one even label it a run-of-the-mill history class. Gooding describes it as a study of

the “facts” of the trials themselves and how their interpretation has changed based on the time and culture of the interpreter. The class looks not only at scholarly interpretations but at popular ones as well: poetry, fiction, theater, film, television, and music. As an extra perk, students watch and analyze episodes of *Bewitched* and *The Simpsons* that invoke the ongoing cultural relevance of the witch trials in our modern imagination. Gooding’s approach as a teacher is not just to throw dates and names out for students to remember. Instead, he demonstrates how the witch trials were events, situations, and ideas that have gone into forming who we are as a people and a nation.

Not only does our honors college offer access to these kinds of intimate educational experiences to students who might not be able to afford a private college environment, but a strong honors college like ours, with the recruiting advantage it has, provides other kinds of benefits that go well beyond individual students. The honors college benefits the land grant mission of a twenty-first-century state institution because it not only saves those students money in getting a customizable education but their presence enriches the entire campus and our state.

Here’s why. When we bring more honors students to our campus, we are raising the level of discussion in every classroom, not just honors classes. When we have more students who know how to balance working smart and playing smart, we are helping teach all of our students how to work and play smarter. When we have more students engaged in going first in the classroom, we create an environment where more are encouraged to go out into the world with boldness and confidence.

So we need to bring in students like Hannah Clipp, a wildlife and fisheries resources major, and a shining example of an honors student who is setting the pace. Over the past two years, Clipp has conducted golden eagle surveys at 4:00am, sunk into knee-deep mud to collect insect samples, and endured icy winds and freezing sleet to check on black bear dens—all for the sake of wildlife research. No, Clipp is not a graduate student. She is an undergraduate who has capitalized on the amazing, real-world research opportunities presented to her as an honors college student. Furthermore, she made history at West Virginia University as the first Mountaineer ever to win both the Udall and Goldwater scholarships, a feat she accomplished in early 2015.

The stock of our incoming freshmen each year is rising higher and higher as more Hannah Clipp enroll at our public campuses. West Virginia University is prepared to offer the support these students need to excel. We need to deliver the innovative programs they deserve and desire—not just because

these programs can benefit students such as Hannah but because they benefit all of the students on our campus.

When we keep talented students at our land-grant universities, we are also keeping them in our state, contributing not just to the university's academic mission but also to its mission to serve the citizens of the state. We want our honors students to be leaders and servants, often both at the same time.

At West Virginia University, our pool of first-year honors students has grown from 580 to 739 for the 2015–2016 academic year, making it our largest incoming honors class ever. Overall, our honors college boasts over 2,200 students, who help make up the university's total enrollment of some 32,000 from more than 110 countries. This past August, those 739 new students arrived on our campus with a bang. All of them participated in a day of service that had them giving back to the community that they were just joining. That kind of service is good for them and for our city.

The honors commitment to service takes place not just in one day or at one place. Honors students on campuses across the country are providing great service to their communities. Many honors students at WVU are not going to spend just four years giving back; many are going to stay in our state and give back to the community for years to come. Educating them here in West Virginia helps them see our state as a place to invest their time, energy, and talent. They might be great teachers in our schools, public servants in our legislature, doctors in our hospitals, and engineers in our industries.

The role of an honors college is clear: it helps bring talented students to our campus and offers them access to an education that they might not otherwise be able to afford. Honors students on campus make our entire university better, and having them in our community and in our state is an investment not just in these students but in ourselves.

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