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What Honors Students Are Like Now

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I recently received a letter from one of our Honors alumnae. Zoë wrote: "I'm doing it again! I've decided to run another marathon in support of the Leukemia Society of America in Anchorage, Alaska. Five years ago, I undertook a great challenge when I successfully completed the marathon in San Diego, running 26.2 miles in just over 4 1/2 hours. Although training in Alaska has proved challenging–getting up in the dark to confront freezing temperatures, snow and ice, while trying to avoid running into moose (which, believe it or not, happens often), the challenges that I'm encountering are nothing compared to the struggles faced by those who are racing for their lives against serious illnesses."

I sat back and thought, "This is definitely an honors student." Why is that? What is it about honors students that make them unique?

I looked at the 2005 graduating class for ideas. I'm listing just three students and a small sampling of the kinds of activities they were involved with during their undergraduate careers, but they are not unique in their engagement and accomplishments. All of the graduates have similar portfolios.

> Catherine is a Foreign Languages major (she's learning Russian, French, Italian, Spanish, and Chinese). She spent a semester at the St. Petersburg Polytechnic University in Russia and plans to attend Law School to specialize in International Law. She is also a flamenco, ballet, and jazz dancer and instructor.
>
> Liz is an English major with a Political Science minor. She was a member of the College Green Party and NARAL Pro-Choice. She's been published, studied in France and Spain, and will be living in Arusha, Tanzania, after graduation working as an apprentice to a UN lawyer at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. She wants to become a journalist.
>
> Mario is an Education major with a Communication Arts endorsement. He is a non-traditional student. Mario is co-founder of the Speech and Debate Society at UNM. He has been published and did original research on magical realism as a McNair Scholar. He will be teaching high school in Georgia or Arizona and working on a Master's.

What Honors Students Are Like Now

I find that Honors students ask probing questions that tend to differ from non-honors students' in-depth of understanding and frequency. They all have interests in many areas. Many honors students either can't settle on a major until their sophomore or junior year or they come to the university already focused on their goal. I find the first kind easier because they are more open to possibilities and are interested in taking a variety of courses. These students, however, do need additional guidance and advising in order to complete their undergraduate program in a timely manner. I find the second group more problematic because they are so focused in one area that their interests are limited to activities and classes that are associated with that field. Helping them think in different ways and about broader topics is challenging.

Honors students are opposed to "banal" academic coursework. As one student wrote, "Generally during the semester, the average student is reluctant to explore subjects and material not specifically required by courses despite deep interest in doing so." I have found that honors students do not enroll in courses merely because they are required. Most of the honors students enroll in courses that will challenge them, make them think, teach them something. Sometimes they have to take courses that are boring or too large, but even in those courses the honors students find ways to discover new information. They also engage in learning beyond the classroom. They are involved in clubs, student government, volunteer activities, campus and community events, and jobs.

Through the years, I have encountered some differences in each entering class. Their communication styles and expectations are different. They often have different attitudes about their studies and life, and their comfort level with technology is surprising. Even their views regarding such things as loyalty and authority are different.

In my early years in honors (late '80's and early '90's), I found honors students to be superachievers. Many of them grew up in single-parent families and took on adult responsibilities early in life. They were often dedicated to people, projects, ideas and tasks rather than longevity and lifetime employment. They were parallel thinkers, independent and resourceful. They accepted change. They looked for flexibility. When I gave an assignment, they wanted to know if they could do something else instead. They wanted to be engaged and were happy to be affiliated with honors. Students in my classes wanted frequent feedback–"How am I doing?" "How can I do better?" What they wrote most frequently in their exit evaluations was how much they hated the bureaucracy of the financial office or the advisors or the administration. During exit interviews they frequently lamented: "Bureaucracy has made my learning experience difficult and frustrating."

Honors students in more recent years seem to be more cheerful and deal with things with humor. They are less influenced by hype and status. They are more optimistic and inclusive in their approach to life. They really enjoy collaborative learning and working in groups. Most of them are selfless and volunteer for numerous projects both on campus and in the community. These students have been using computers since pre-kindergarten. They are e-learners and are used to instant communication. Many of the students are into extreme sports and want to do everything quickly. They value speed.

Honors teachers have to be in touch with the changing perspectives and values of each new generation of students. Those who see themselves as facilitators of learning can find a great deal to offer the students. This role requires honors faculty to have skills in both their subject areas and in the management of learning. In addition, honors faculty are flexible. They are always looking for new and challenging strategies to teach their students and make provisions for original research, independent studies or investigations, internships, mentorships, and collaborative projects.

Honors students are curious and learn early on to make the best possible use of the resources available while becoming fully responsible for their own learning. They have a real passion for knowledge. They want to understand, and, for the most part, they want to make a difference. They are willing to test themselves, go beyond expectations, and run real or metaphorical marathons that will benefit others as well as themselves.

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