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Building an Honors Education for the Twenty-First Century: Making Connections In and Outside the Classroom

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When I was sifting through stacks of brochures from colleges as a high school student (in the days before the Internet and college web sites), I had a vague sense that I wanted to find a college with an honors program in which it was “cool” for students to develop close mentoring relationships with faculty and where students were encouraged to seek both breadth and depth in their education. While I enjoyed my public high school experience, I knew that I wanted to go beyond memorizing facts and preparing for standardized tests. I could not fully articulate my educational goals or the reasons for them at that time, but in hindsight I realize that I was seeking a significant opportunity to participate in an environment marked by high-impact learning practices, a focus on the big issues facing humanity, and lifelong learning.

I had the good fortune to enjoy such a life-changing experience in college, and as a university president I now strive to create similar opportunities for the next generations of students.

I wound up selecting Swarthmore College in large part because of its unique honors program. When I was at Swarthmore, students in the honors program were required to participate in six intensive seminars (in a major and a minor) during the last two years of college. These seminars generally met once a week for several hours and were marked by very close faculty-student interaction. Students took turns writing papers to share with their classmates. Those who wrote seminar papers read additional material beyond what the other students read for that week and were also responsible for leading the discussion on that topic. Seminar professors served as guides and mentors but did not lecture. They also didn't give tests or hand out grades because, at the end of a student's senior year, external examiners came from other colleges and universities across the country to administer oral and written examinations of their own making (with only the seminar syllabus as a guide).

This student-centered approach to learning (modeled on the tutorial system at Oxford) required participants to take an active role and created a strong sense of community. You learned from and with your classmates, and you relied on them to write useful papers and to lead quality discussions. Students spent less time trying to impress their professors with answers they thought the professors wanted to hear—since their classroom professors were not the ones ultimately responsible for their evaluation in the program—and more time grappling with big questions and issues.

We honed our critical thinking and communication skills through our discussions and debates, and we often continued the conversations outside of class in the residence halls, in the dining hall, or on the quad. The program forced us to take initiative, and we had freedom and flexibility to be creative and innovative in our approach to learning.

In preparing for the external examinations at the end of my senior year, I also found myself making connections between different courses and disciplines that I had not grasped or appreciated when I first engaged with the material. I especially remember how the seminar American Intellectual History, which had seemed initially like a hodge-podge of disconnected strands of thought, finally started to make sense as I began to see the interrelationships among developments in science, politics, philosophy, culture, and the arts.

Reflecting on my career since that time, I can see how I have internalized and utilized elements of my college honors experience in a variety of professional settings. As a young lawyer in private practice, I often found myself seeking to look beyond any one strand of case law to make connections between different branches of the law—and in doing so to try to develop creative solutions to conflicts that at first seemed binary or perhaps even intractable. Later, as in-house counsel at two large research universities (Michigan and Rutgers), I relished the opportunity to work with faculty from many different fields as we learned to communicate across the boundaries of our respective disciplines. By working together and engaging in active listening, we were able to share different perspectives on difficult situations and challenges and ultimately to identify, articulate, and build connections between our fields in ways that helped us to avoid or minimize legal and practical risks.

My college honors experience taught me the importance not just of interdisciplinary connections, but also of personal connections and relationships as a key to intellectual stimulation and growth. As a result of my college honors experience, I have found myself repeatedly seeking to create smaller learning communities within the larger institutional contexts in which I have found myself. At Michigan and Rutgers, for example, I developed and taught seminars and led independent studies that I modeled deliberately on my Swarthmore experience.

As president of James Madison University (JMU)—a large public comprehensive institution—I continue to participate in the honors experience to build such relationships with future generations of students and to enhance my own lifelong learning. In JMU's honors program, I currently co-teach a seminar on leadership in which we intentionally adopt a variety of high-impact learning practices such as individual and group presentations, debate, case studies, and community service learning. As we wrestle with difficult leadership decisions in the seminar, my own thinking about leadership continues to evolve based on what I hear and learn from our amazing and passionate students. I can only hope that the students are learning as much as I am along the way.

JMU is now seeking to transform its honors program into the Madison Honors College, drawing inspiration from the Father of the Constitution for whom we are named. James Madison was one of our nation's foremost lifelong learners. Madison studied with influential teachers and mentors who

exposed him to the great political and philosophical works of the ages. He continued to take the initiative to read voraciously throughout his lifetime. He also learned from prolonged and multi-faceted debates with his peers and was known to have changed his mind on critical issues (such as the need for the Bill of Rights) after experience and reflection.

Personal mentoring and collaborative relationships were at the heart of Madison's learning just as they were the foundation of my college honors experience. Technology may give us new tools to augment teaching and learning, but we are inspired and encouraged to grow by people, not machines. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned from my own honors experience was how to engage with other people in deep, meaningful, and civil discourse as we struggle to find common ground and identify potential solutions to complex problems.

In serving as a leader on governing boards, task forces, and committees, I often seek to go around the table to ensure that all participants have the opportunity to express their perspectives and to take into account all of the angles and possibilities before making tough decisions. I know that I make better decisions when I first listen carefully to others' points of view. In fact, I have found that some of the most productive and satisfying meetings are those at which I have changed my mind based on a thoughtful discussion in which I was persuaded by new information or cogent arguments.

My hope is that the honors college at JMU will provide similar opportunities and experiences both in and outside the classroom. Our new JMU vision statement calls upon us to become "the national model of the engaged university: engaged with ideas and the world," and the honors college has a critical role to play to help bring that vision to life. The honors college is therefore grounded in key elements I encountered in my higher education that focused on relationship-building, including small classes and faculty mentoring. It also emphasizes the importance of taking initiative for one's learning through independent scholarship.

The model of honors education we are creating for tomorrow needs to build on the fundamental and time-tested strengths of existing programs, but it can and must also evolve to meet the demands of the twenty-first century. At JMU, this evolution is reflected in the requirement that students select one of several tracks or areas of emphasis—in creativity, global studies, leadership, research, or service—that are deliberately designed to integrate learning across disciplinary boundaries. As our students prepare to be active citizens in an increasingly diverse democracy and to compete in a global economy, the

JMU program also features an enhanced focus on diversity of thought and perspective. This approach will strengthen the ability of students to understand, relate to, and work with people from many different backgrounds.

In this high-tech era when attention spans are limited and people are exposed to vast amounts of information that is often a mile wide and an inch deep, students in honors at JMU are also required to develop senior honors projects. Not only do such longer-term projects build relationships among faculty and students, but they can also develop written and oral communication skills that are essential for success in every type of workplace and organization.

While I applied the tools and lessons of my honors experience in the workplace after I graduated, JMU honors students now have opportunities to test and apply their theoretical insights in real-world situations through study abroad and experiential practicums before they graduate. These types of hands-on experiences were sometimes frowned on in the past by those who preferred a pure “ivory tower” approach to higher education, but they can be a critical ingredient in broadening perspective and deepening understanding.

These practices and approaches are based on sound pedagogical research, but even so we cannot rest smugly on our assumptions about their actual impact on student learning. For this reason, at a time when many people have called for greater accountability in higher education, we must be prepared to articulate and assess student learning outcomes much more clearly than we have in the past. We take this challenge seriously at JMU, which is why we have one of the nation’s leading centers of assessment. We intend to shine a laser-like spotlight on each of the elements of our honors college so that we can continuously improve what and how we teach. This accountability is reinforced with a careful emphasis on individualized academic advising as well as with guidance and oversight from an external Honors Advisory Council that consists largely of alumni who represent a wide variety of undergraduate majors and professional backgrounds.

A robust honors college within a university can have a large impact not just on the students in the program but also on the entire campus community. Honors students can serve as role models for their peers and encourage other students to push themselves beyond the formal requirements of their coursework. They can spread their love of learning in ways that are far more effective than any academic requirements. I believe the students in Swarthmore’s honors program played that role when I was in college, and I see it happening at JMU today. Support from the top for a strong honors college is

thus an important investment in all of our students as we seek to prepare them for the uncertainties and challenges of the future.

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