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The Practical Value of Honors

JAMES R. JOHNSEN, PRESIDENT

University of Alaska

INTERIM HONORS DEAN: JOHN MOURACADE (ANCHORAGE)

HONORS COORDINATOR: SOL NEELY (SOUTHEAST)

HONORS DIRECTOR: MARSHA SOUSA (FAIRBANKS)

The University of Alaska serves the diverse peoples of Alaska through three separately accredited universities and their community campuses. The system's three universities at Fairbanks (UAF), Anchorage (UAA), and Juneau (UAS) differ greatly. UAF is a research university located in the Alaskan interior in a city of under 100,000 people. UAA is a comprehensive university in the population and commercial center of the state. UAS is a regional university located in Alaska's capitol that serves the people of Southeast Alaska (the S is for Southeast). Within each of these universities, the faculty developed honors programs that fit the context and mission of their unique institution. While these programs differ in their particulars and evolved independently, they have had remarkably similar emphases and impact.

As with honors programs generally, honors at the University of Alaska develops leadership, fosters interdisciplinary thinking, engages the critical

issues of our day, and deepens students' academic experience through community engagement and undergraduate research. All three programs have a significant community service component. This element is most noteworthy at UAS where the director, Professor Sol Neely, has developed a program called "The Flying University," where university students go inside prison to study alongside incarcerated students.

Professor Neely's outstanding work in Juneau is characteristic of honors across the universities. Each university exhibits unique strengths and opportunities. UAS is a smaller university in a smaller urban setting where it is fitting for honors to reflect a commitment to issues in the community and issues of justice. UAF is the midsized campus that reflects a very traditional student residential population, and its honors program stands out as the one with the strongest living learning community. UAF honors is located in a house that serves as a social center for honors students. UAA, located in the largest urban center in Alaska, has been the leader in undergraduate research. Through partnerships with community leaders and industry, UAA has built the largest undergraduate research program at UA, the Office of Undergraduate Research and Scholarship, which supports over a hundred undergraduate research projects every year.

While honors programs have developed at each university to reflect the needs and opportunities of that institution, collaboration across campuses has emerged as the programs mature. For example, UAA worked with UAF to assist their creation of a robust undergraduate research program, the Undergraduate Research and Scholarship Activity Program. Since that time, the three programs have collaborated on curriculum development. The first product of that collaboration is a course entitled "Methods of Inquiry," which has a core content of twelve digital modules. UAA and UAF each contributed five modules while UAS produced two. The collaborative work was funded centrally by the statewide offices and managed locally at each of the main campuses.

Given the nature of honors across the University of Alaska system, the value of honors should already be evident. Undergraduate research, learning communities, community engagement, and enhanced curriculum add tremendously to the institution by continuously putting faculty and students into high impact pedagogical settings. Frank Bruni's recent *New York Times* article http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/opinion/sunday/frank-bruni-a-prudent-college-path.html?_r=0 on the value of honors at public institutions articulates many of the benefits honors brings to the University of

Alaska. Bruni seems to have Alaskan students in mind when he states, “Perhaps most important, honors colleges provide a supportive, challenging haven to some gifted young men and women who don’t make the cut at private schools with plunging acceptance rates or who aren’t prepared, for financial and other reasons, to pursue higher education far from their homes.”

However, honors plays an even greater role in Alaska than in other states. Alaska is home to few institutions of higher education, and it is a 2,500 mile drive to the next state over. Honors helps fill that gap by providing three distinct liberal arts college experiences within UAA, UAF, and UAS. This expanded opportunity within the state system is crucial for retaining some of our best students, who would otherwise go elsewhere. Alaska’s future is in its people. Honors at UA helps keep some of the best students at home and provides opportunities and challenges that allow them to fully develop their potential. Because of the state’s need for talent, it is critical that honors thrives at all three universities.

Although some paint honors as elitist, allotting a disproportionate amount of resources to relatively few students, this way of thinking is flawed because it looks at honors in isolation. The truth is that the resources put into honors benefit the institution generally. Because honors students represent a wide variety of programs, they improve the learning environment in their other classes. Any professor will tell you that just a handful of more active, engaged, and aware students changes a class. By permeating the university, honors students spread the impact of honors across all programs. In this way, the resources put into honors flow out to the rest of the academic programs on campus.

Finally, the most important value of honors is its impact on students. Honors changes lives by building a community of engaged students and training them to benefit society through learning, discovery, and service. The support network, encouragement, and programming open pathways for students that inspire them to go further and do more than they had previously thought possible, thus fulfilling the main job of a university: providing an array of opportunities and equipping students to take advantage of them.

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