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A Personal and Professional Perspective on an Honors Program

GEOFFREY S. MEARNS, PRESIDENT

Northern Kentucky University

INTERIM HONORS DIRECTOR: BELLE ZEMBRODT

Three decades ago, I had the good fortune of attending a highly selective, private college. At Yale, I received an excellent education because most of the classes were taught by tenured faculty who were experts in their respective fields. The relatively small class sizes and the wide variety of other educational opportunities ensured that each student received personal attention, encouragement, and support.

Today, I have the privilege of serving as the president of Northern Kentucky University, a comprehensive, public university located just five miles south of Cincinnati, Ohio. At NKU, we aspire to provide a personal educational experience to the more than 12,000 undergraduate students who enroll each year. Given the demographics of our undergraduate student body—more than 50% are first-generation college students and 40% are eligible for Pell grants—the education we provide is truly transformative.

A few years ago, Felipe Fernández-Armesto wrote about the ability of regional, public universities to change the lives of their students:

To find places that make an alchemical difference—that ignite unsuspected genius, enchant Cinderellas into princesses and magic modest ducklings into very fine swans—you have to look at the truly heroic local and regional universities. These institutions have shoestring budgets and few or no historic advantages, but make up for their deficiencies by the commitment of the teachers, the ambition of the students and the zeal of the communities that surround them.

Northern Kentucky is just such a regional university.

One of the ways that we deliver on our commitment to our students is through our excellent honors program. The NKU Honors Program, which has grown to more than 500 students, enables these students to take special seminars and to conduct research projects with our senior faculty. The program focuses on developing the analytical skills that are vital for success in our dynamic and competitive economy. Because of the demographic profile of the students both in the honors program and at our university, our honors students are exposed to diverse perspectives and experiences. These experiences are critical for success in our country, where public, comprehensive universities educate 63% of all African American students, 47% of all Latino students, and 50% of all Native American students.

Based on my own educational background and my professional experience, I believe that an honors program at a large, diverse, public university is an excellent choice for an ambitious, high-achieving student. As Frank Bruni wrote recently in *The New York Times*, an increasing number of outstanding students are choosing to enroll in an honors program or an honors college at a public university. According to Bruni, these students can enjoy specialized programs and small classes while also being able to take advantage of the resources and expansive programming of a large, public university—benefits that honors students often tell me are the reasons that they decided to attend NKU.

My daughter Clare, who contributed to this essay, chose to attend NKU in large part because of our honors program. During her senior year in high school, Clare applied for admission to nine institutions, including a few private colleges and several nationally prominent universities. After a few months, she received acceptance letters from several of the more selective intuitions, the kind of colleges that her family and friends expected her to choose.

Throughout her decision-making process, though, NKU continued to spark her intellectual curiosity and to engage her emotional aspirations. During an honors recruiting event, Clare heard students and faculty describe with enthusiasm and passion the various project-based courses that are common in our honors program. They also described how each student does a two-semester-long project on a topic of his or her choice, providing an opportunity that prepares students for graduate school and professional careers. Clare chose to enroll at NKU because of such opportunities, and, at the end of her first year, she was chosen to present her paper at the annual honors program banquet. Clare had conducted research on the causes of the Rwandan genocide and the continuing challenges the people of Rwanda still face.

When she was considering her options, Clare was also attracted to the small classes where she would receive individual attention. During her first year in our honors program, Clare was regularly challenged to express her views in class, and she relished the prompt, thorough feedback that she received from our faculty on her written work. These experiences improved her oral and written advocacy skills, and they enhanced her self-confidence.

Our honors program also features mentoring by faculty members. Because of the smaller class sizes and the seminar format, honors students have the opportunity to know their professors very well. In her first year in the program, Clare was mentored by an inspiring professor who facilitated important discussions on sometimes sensitive, thought-provoking, and important topics. This professor pushed Clare and her classmates to work hard and to expand their intellectual curiosity. As a result of these personal relationships, Clare and her peers grew rapidly as students and scholars. Even after the semester was over, Clare's faculty mentor continued to meet with her on a regular basis to assist her in furthering her thoughts and ideas on her research topic.

We all know that technology is changing higher education. Notwithstanding technological innovation, I still believe that one of the most important educational experiences—if not the most important—is the personal, human relationship between a student and a faculty member. Our honors program facilitates and expedites these transformative relationships.

Our honors program also includes a peer mentoring program. In this program, an experienced student regularly attends the freshman introductory class. The peer mentor provides support, advice, and encouragement to our new students. After her freshman year, Clare was asked to serve as a peer mentor. She has quickly realized that being a mentor is an enriching experience.

She has learned that, by serving other students, she is developing leadership skills and reaping many other rewards.

For Clare and so many of our outstanding students, the honors program demonstrates NKU's commitment to our collective vision. We aspire to prepare our students to have successful careers and to lead meaningful lives. Our core values include a commitment to excellence and inclusiveness. Our honors program provides a personal educational experience that challenges our students to achieve their own personal dream. Our honors students do not come to our university with a sense of entitlement; rather, they arrive on our campus with the ambition to learn and to serve. Our honors program fans that flame: it fuels that innate passion for greater knowledge and understanding.

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