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Honors as Whole-Person Education

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The Oral Roberts University Honors Program attracts a significant number of students each year, both as incoming freshmen and currently enrolled students, seeking a richer academic experience. While the honors program offers a higher-level academic challenge, its value lies beyond what is simply learned in the classroom. The program contributes to the intellectual, social, and spiritual development of its students, but its greatest value lies in its ability to synthesize these components into a whole-person education that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Statistics show that potential honors program students are more prepared for the rigor of college coursework; on average, incoming HP students' high school GPA is 0.5 points higher than the GPA of non-honors students, and they score almost 300 points higher on the SAT and 10 points higher on the ACT than do matriculating non-honors students. Designed for this well-prepared set of students, the academic division of the honors program functions on three primary levels: Freshman Honors Seminar, honors sections of standard courses, and the Fellows Seminars. Required for all HP students,

Freshman Honors Seminar (FHS) is many students' first introduction to the program, taken in either the first or second semester of their undergraduate education. This discussion-based seminar is led by upper-division honors students who are selected and supervised by the honors directors, and it offers an introduction to the format of the ensuing Fellows seminars. Since FHS is a zero-credit course, it offers a safe environment for students to hone their skills in critical thinking and civil debate before they are tested in higher-division courses.

An important value of honors is the opportunity it offers students to stretch their worldviews and expand their perceptions through moderated debate and discussion. Most years a book is chosen for Freshman Honors Seminar that is either controversial or intellectually stimulating, requiring analysis from multiple points of view. These discussions can include gender, race, American culture, class, or the disillusionment of the postmodern millennial. Guest speakers introduce subjects stretching from science to business to literature. The guests include HP alumni who have recently gone on to post-graduate studies or professions and who motivate current students to excel in their areas of study, learn more about other career fields, and get involved in the HP. The skills and wisdom learned in FHS are vital to students' success in later honors courses.

The ORU Honors Program is divided into two classifications: Fellows and Scholars. Upon enrollment, the top 16–18 students are selected as Fellows based on ACT or SAT composite score, class ranking (if public high school), recommendations, and a personal essay; the remaining applicants are offered a Scholar's position. Fellows receive a larger scholarship and are required to take five of the six Fellows Seminars, which form the creative backbone of the honors program. Fusing two different disciplines—such as mathematics and history, English and science fiction, or theology and science—these six courses offer students and faculty a chance to pursue interdisciplinary studies. Despite their name, five of the six Fellows Seminars are open to all honors students; Artistic Expression is the exception, open only to freshman Fellows. Through these courses, students not only pursue a higher level of academic study but develop skills in creative thinking, integrating the content learned from various disciplines into a cohesive general education. The Fellows Seminars substitute for general education requirements, allowing students the freedom to pursue academic challenges without overburdening their course load. These seminars provide an academic challenge and contribute to students' social and spiritual development, encouraging students to discuss

weighty or controversial topics that require skills in communication, critical thinking, and wisdom. Students not only learn to integrate their academic knowledge with their spiritual conscience but to communicate their views with maturity and tact to peers who hold differing opinions.

Through the Fellows Seminars, the HP contributes significantly to the development of a whole-person education. Students develop a community of peers encouraging and developing each other in a quest for knowledge and wisdom, guided by their faculty. In a recent study evaluating the effectiveness of the Fellows Seminars in developing an educated, spiritually informed worldview, students consistently reported that these courses pushed them to integrate their academic and spiritual development in the formation of a holistic worldview. Students carry these skills forward into their fields of study and research as they continue to innovate and to integrate their academic interests with social and spiritual concerns.

Outside the classroom, honors students maintain a close-knit community. The honors wings (dedicated floors in two men's and two women's dormitories) foster a community complementary to that formed in the classroom. As students study and live together, they continue to form relationships that will carry through the remainder of their undergraduate careers and into the post-graduate world. These floors primarily serve freshmen, with a handful of upperclassmen remaining to pass down the distinctive culture of the individual wing. New students thus have a sort of "home base" as they adapt to the new environment of university life and the challenges of honors coursework. The honors wings are the catalysts for a variety of the annual social events that constitute an honors culture, such as the HP retreat, game nights, masquerade ball, honors chapels, and Christmas parties that flourish in addition to academic honors program events (Sweeney et al. 221).

The honors wings contribute to students' social development, mitigate elitism, and promote future leadership by opening access to non-honors students who request to live on an honors wing if space is available. Many honors students choose to participate in student leadership after their freshman or sophomore year, resulting in a diaspora of honors students who hold offices and leadership positions in the ORU Student Association and in the Chaplain, RA, and APA programs. Allowing non-honors students to fill empty rooms on honors floors discourages the formation of an isolated or exclusive culture. Instead, honors students live and form close friendships with students from outside the program, who are welcome to participate in various honors events and become a part of the HP family.

As a Christian institution, Oral Roberts University stresses the importance of religious faith, and the honors program stresses the value of faith to a whole-person education. Alyssa Gerick, a sophomore Fellow in the honors program this year, writes:

The Honors Program at ORU serves a vital role in reminding students that as Christians we are called to dedicate our every commitment and action to God. The program accomplishes this by teaching students that their performance at the academic level can and should be used to glorify God. Each person is gifted with a different ability that is to be used in building the kingdom of God, and the HP helps groom those who are called to dedicate their minds to God's kingdom. Additionally, the HP provides students the opportunity to utilize their full intellectual capacity. In doing this, the HP is acting as a vehicle for students to obey the great commandment to love God with all of their heart, soul, strength, and *mind*. As a student in the HP, I can personally attest to the ever-present temptation of neglecting the stretching and growing of my own personal education. Striving to go beyond the expected performance and commitment requires accountability and encouragement, both of which the HP [helps cultivate] for an involved member. The fellowship that proved to be so vital in the early church and continues to be vital today is yet another benefit of the HP. As an incoming freshman [last] year I was immensely grateful for the group of students that I was automatically acquainted with because of the HP. Because of the shared Christian faith in the HP, I was privileged to experience Paul's description of how members in the body of Christ need to strengthen each other. This experience consisted of friendly competitions at HP events which built teamwork skills, study groups to enhance academic performance, and special friendships which allowed personal discussions. The HP is an effective instrument in developing Christians who are willing to rely on each other and who are ready to bring change to their academic sphere of influence.

As a Christian school, ORU holds biweekly chapels for the entire student body on Wednesdays and Fridays. Twice a semester, the HP hosts its own chapel, with student-led worship and a short message by either the Honors Student Council Chaplain or an invited guest speaker. These messages vary

widely by topic, but generally encourage students to put their academic skills and learning to service in their faith.

In recent years, honors students have begun a volunteer weekly Bible study and prayer time, meeting before classes to study and discuss issues of faith, service, and learning. These meetings are a fine example of the way that the Oral Roberts University Honors Program unites intellectual, social, and spiritual development into a whole-person education: students, united by friendships formed through classes and social events, apply the knowledge and skills learned in their academic work while always seeking a deeper spirituality.

REFERENCES

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