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Advancing Humanity though Honors

MICHAEL RAO, PRESIDENT
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HONORS DEAN: BARRY FALK

In February of 1967, newly elected Governor Ronald Reagan delivered a speech about California's austere budget in which he chided the "intellectual luxury" of higher education as something that could lead to "economic ruin" if unchecked. "Taxpayers shouldn't be subsidizing intellectual curiosity," Gov. Reagan decreed. Thus began in California and soon the rest of the nation a historic conversation about the role of higher education: Do we exist to open minds to the world or open doors to a job?

Reagan boldly argued the latter despite the tradition of education as a social and moral good, an idea championed years earlier by another man who would be president. Liberally educated people are "worthy to receive and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens," Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1779, forty years before he founded the University of Virginia. Higher education would strengthen our fledgling democracy because well-educated people "would not be swayed by tyrants."

As our nation's most-populated state faced financial burdens two centuries later, though, Gov. Reagan asked public universities to shift their focus from

developing minds to developing workers, changing America's view of what higher education should be. Before Reagan's address, three out of four students said they went to college to "develop a meaningful philosophy of life." Only about half as many said their primary intent was to be "very well off financially." In the years following, however, student attitudes reversed. Today, eighty percent of students say that the greatest value of an education is its potential economic returns—more than double the percentage before Reagan's transformational speech.

Our great universities offer countless benefits to those we educate and to the societies they represent, including the prospects of a better financial future; several studies show lifetime earnings increase exponentially with degree attainment. This important benefit, though, must not define what we do. The primary purpose of higher education, especially an honors education, must always be changing the world by changing lives. The ideas and innovations that occur on our campuses every day—in laboratories, clinics, studios, classrooms, and dorm rooms—are the catalysts that will transform humanity.

No better examples of transforming humanity occur than those that take place in honors colleges and programs across America and among students like James Denison at Virginia Commonwealth University. James has used his extraordinary knowledge of statistics and mathematical modeling to help save lives. Calling on the advanced mathematics that he studies as part of his honors curriculum at VCU, he has shown how fire trucks in the counties around Richmond, Virginia, can respond to emergencies more quickly and efficiently, thus getting to people in dire need sooner. In VCU's Honors Summer Undergraduate Research Program, James made mathematical models and applied them to a real-life problem that will make a difference for people.

What James does—and what honors students across America do—speaks to a university's greatest mission: changing the world by changing lives, through what we discover, create, innovate, and inspire. Yes, we prepare students to take jobs, but more than that, we prepare them to create new jobs and new industries. We prepare them to innovate. Whatever future they can imagine, they can make real. They are the ones who will finally solve problems that have plagued human beings for centuries. Indeed, the next Greatest Generation consists of the students in our honors colleges today. We must ensure that they have every chance and every resource to succeed in big ways.

Honors education is not inexpensive, but its value to our universities and those we serve is undeniable. Honors education encourages, even demands, interdisciplinary collaboration. It asks students and faculty to come together to

innovate and create broadly, and to work with each other as a team of scholars and pioneers from different backgrounds and different disciplines. Similarly, it fosters diversity in all of its forms, a core tenet of the educational experience, bringing together bright students and faculty whose only similarity is their shared focus on excellence. Innovation and creativity happen when we surround ourselves not with those who are most like us but rather with those who will challenge us and inspire us to think differently.

The honors curriculum builds deep thinkers, those who are re-imagining what is possible for humanity to conceive and achieve, starting with real-world experiences in the communities we serve, asking questions no one else has asked, and then finding the answers no one else can find, as James did. Pioneering discoveries, not simply learning about them, is inherent in the undergraduate research our honors students conduct with their faculty mentors.

As universities, we are in the business of “what’s next?” What is the next great innovation in medicine, science, art, literature, communications, and business? What is the next remarkable innovation in technology? What will be the next great achievement of humankind? No one is better positioned to ask and answer “what’s next?” than someone who has the foundation and future afforded by an honors education.

The benefits of an honors college, of course, extend beyond the college itself to every aspect of the university. Honors colleges attract renowned faculty and the best and brightest students; in doing so, they raise the profile, prestige, and reputation of the entire institution. Honors colleges may serve as testing grounds for new pedagogies. Studies show that honors students also elevate the discussion in non-honors courses and are more likely to serve as student leaders. In short, an excellent honors college raises all aspects of a university’s reputation and reality, and that is why I am deeply proud of the remarkable honors college at my institution, Virginia Commonwealth University, where students like James Denison will help solve society’s biggest problems and where our dean, Barry Falk, who is a recognized leader in the National Collegiate Honors Council, helps ensure that our focus remains clear: We exist not simply to advance a single career, but to advance humanity. Nowhere does this advancement happen more clearly, or more purposefully, than in our honors colleges.

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