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Susan J. Koch

University of Illinois at Springfield, koch@uis.edu

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The Culture of Honors

SUSAN J. KOCH, CHANCELLOR

University of Illinois at Springfield

HONORS DIRECTOR: MARC KLINGSHIRN

As I began to consider the value of honors at the University of Illinois at Springfield, the first thought that came to mind was this sentence from Wendell Berry's 1987 book, *Home Economics*: "The thing being made in a university is humanity." Our honors program "makes humanity" in a unique way that adds value to the educational experience for the individual honors student at the same time that it adds value and benefit to the university and, by extension, to humanity beyond.

Though my own undergraduate experience predated establishment of the formal honors program at my undergraduate alma mater, I was fortunate to have an honors-like experience at the small college I attended in my home state. Dakota Normal School was founded by the Territorial Legislature in 1881, eight years before South Dakota became a state, for the purpose of "training teachers in the Dakota Territories." By the time I arrived there in 1967, it had become a thriving university with many elements that define the college honors programs of today.

During my freshman year, the Vietnam War was raging. Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered that April. Though a sobering and sometimes tumultuous time on most campuses including mine, what mattered was that the culture on this small campus (including a challenging curriculum, intellectual engagement with the issues of the day, and an exceptional performing arts program) ignited opportunities for growth and exploration that were the first steps for me on what became a lifelong path of liberal learning and self-actualization. I still remember the excitement of being surrounded by bright minds and new ideas, and I owe a great debt to the dedicated Dakota State University professors who set me on the route that remains my intellectual and professional path today. That path has included many rewarding experiences, among them helping to create the honors program at the University of Northern Iowa and now, since 2011, serving as chancellor at the Springfield campus of the University of Illinois, where the Capital Scholars Honors Program is thriving.

My experience as an honors student and now as a chancellor is that the value of honors lies in that single word: “culture.” Students who participate in honors at UIS, for example, are welcomed into a small residential community within the larger university. That community provides a culture where talented students and faculty learn together. Honors students feel an immediate sense of place that reflects and recognizes earlier academic achievements while at the same time it presents endless opportunities to engage with new ideas, new people, and new places in the company of equally bright and motivated learners. The honors program is a community with a culture all its own.

At the heart of the CAP Scholars program is an understanding that the problems facing today’s world are complex and that solutions often require the application of knowledge from many different areas of study. For that reason, the program is centered on an engaging interdisciplinary curriculum where exceptional UIS faculty challenge students to investigate, debate, and think critically about the complexities of today’s society. The curriculum encourages students to recognize that the same topic may be viewed and analyzed in different ways and for different reasons. Courses are designed to teach students to think clearly and creatively and to expand their knowledge of and appreciation for various worldviews and cultures.

Many honors students arrive as first-year students bringing successful leadership experiences from high school. Developing those leadership skills further, whatever the starting point, is what the UIS honors director calls “finding their inner leader”; this is a major emphasis of the honors experience,

where the deliberately organized culture of the honors program provides added value. Honors students serve as peer tutors and mentors for other students with the supervision of honors program staff, and many also provide leadership for campus organizations and community service activities in the larger community. Taking full advantage of the campus location in Springfield, the state capital of Illinois, UIS CAP Scholars also participate in seminars with Illinois political leaders as well as leaders from the private sector. A number of UIS honors students are also part of the university's growing Division II athletics program, another opportunity for leadership and engagement.

Honors students are surrounded by bright minds, challenging problems, a panoply of ideas, and numerous opportunities to collaborate and dig deeper into important questions. As students move through the curriculum and associated research opportunities, faculty help them develop the skills of inquiry that lead to deeper understandings and discovery, setting the stage for the successful pursuit of advanced professional or academic degrees. At the same time, the residential honors community provides a socially nurturing home base for cultural and social activities that enrich the time that students spend away from their studies and that lead to additional learning opportunities as well as lifelong friendships and professional associations.

Having taught in honors myself, I can personally confirm that the presence of an honors program provides important opportunities for faculty growth, especially in interdisciplinary research and teaching. After studying the confluence of health and human rights at the Francois Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard with Jonathan Mann, who founded the World Health Organization's Global Program on AIDS, I developed and taught an honors course at UNI titled "Health and Human Rights"; this course provided an opportunity for me, as a young faculty member, to develop new knowledge about an emerging public health issue of great importance at the same time that it provided motivation for me to reach out to faculty with similar interests in sociology, social work, and biology. The course was a vehicle for exploring the issue deeply with a group of exceptional undergraduate students, not only benefitting them but also helping me as a researcher and teacher. It remains today one of my most satisfying experiences in the academy.

Another value of the honors program for the campus is that it provides a vehicle for recruiting talented and motivated students who contribute to the intellectual and social climate of the campus in countless ways. These contributions are likely to enhance the reputation and rankings of the institution,

but, more importantly, they improve and stretch the educational experience for the student body as a whole.

Finally, the honors program creates a stream of talented and successful alums who remain appreciative of their honors experience and often stay engaged with the university in important ways. They are lifetime assets of the campus and of their communities, with stories attesting to and reinforcing the quality of the educational experience that their alma mater provided. Sometimes that engagement includes a significant gift, an investment in the campus that supports future students and the university.

A recent University of Illinois at Springfield honors graduate, John Tienken, who is now a law student at the University of Chicago, may describe the value of the honors experience at UIS best: “The CAP Honors Program,” he states, “was an invaluable foundation for my undergraduate years. The program’s true value came from pushing me to go beyond my political science major. In the interdisciplinary classes taught by professors from other departments, I was exposed to different ways of looking at problems. Some of these professors would become close mentors for the rest of my time at UIS. More than the knowledge I gained, the relationships I made with professors and scholars outside of my major have had lasting impact.”

I couldn’t have said it better myself.

Chancellor Koch may be contacted at
koch@uis.edu.