



CHALLENGING THE HONOR STUDENT

By ROBIN FRAMES

What does it mean to be an honor student?

Ten years ago the University of Missouri and many other educational institutions did little more than recognize the superior students' talents and efforts.

Today the Arts and Science Honors College on the Columbia campus is actively engaged in developing these students' exceptional scholastic potential to the fullest. Honor students now are given more than top marks and medals. They are challenged with special courses and rewarded with opportunity.

Honors courses differ from regular courses in that they are generally smaller, cover more material, involve more student discussion, and often experiment with new and unusual teaching techniques.

Honors College director Dr. Dick Renner says the program "is trying to preserve the best of the old liberal arts college tradition within the

framework of a university with 20,000 students. We want to provide more than mere instruction. We want to give students a meaningful education."

Honors courses are created on two levels in the 20 Arts and Science departments. "General honors" courses are usually special sections of regular courses, adapted for honors students and open to anyone who qualifies academically (B average or better). Any student pursuing honors courses regularly is eligible to work for General Honors Certificate.

"Departmental honors" courses are designed for students majoring in one of the arts and science fields, and lead to special degrees such as "Bachelor of Arts in English with Honors."

In the final months of 1968, the Honors College headquarters moved from the Arts and Science Building to a house on nearby, quiet Kuhlman Court. There, students taking honors



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courses gather for classes and seminars upstairs, and in a comfortable lounge downstairs for informal talks and study.

Although the house at 612 Kuhlman Court gives the Honors College a home of its own, Dr. Renner points out that “We don’t segregate the students into a unit by themselves, as some other universities do, with a set program and a special faculty.” On the average, honor students take only one or two honors courses each semester.

The director claims that honors programs are a kind of reaction to the Russian Sputnik rocket success. “College faculties began to wonder if American education was failing. A period of self-examination began, and soon afterwards the University of Missouri started its honors program.”

On the level of general honors, where regular courses are adapted to the talents of exceptional

students, the regular course schedule is speeded up and more material added. “We go on the assumption,” says Dr. Renner, “that the honors student can assimilate the regular material in three-fourths the normal time.”

The more advanced and specialized departmental honors courses are often the ones that experiment. Next semester, for example, an English professor and a professor of mechanical engineering will jointly teach a course dealing with structural perception.

“Perhaps the most successful experiment has been the general honors humanities course,” Dr. Renner says. “A selection of faculty members from the departments of philosophy, English, art, history and various foreign languages teach a four-semester course in the history of Western ideas.”

Just as regular courses are adapted to the honors program, sometimes experimental hon-

ors courses are adapted to and incorporated into the regular Arts and Science curricula. A course called psycho-biology of behavior is now being considered for regular teaching in the psychology department. A political science professor teaching a new honors course in the problems of bureaucracy is thinking of adapting the material for his graduate political science seminar.

The success of the Arts and Science Honors College has begun to infect other divisions of

the Columbia campus, such as Education, where there are now some general honors courses and a broader program in the process of being approved. The College of Engineering offers a shortened curriculum for honors students so that degrees may be earned more quickly.

Dr. Renner believes that the honors program grew up naturally in the Arts and Science College because it is the campus's major educational unit, handling about 65 per cent of the



Honors College classes are small, informal. Here Dr. Richard S. Kirkendall leads a discussion in history.

teaching. He adds that the A&S division offers "many of the basic courses that are required by different colleges all over the campus. It is on this level that the need is greatest for improving instruction and accommodating the academically talented student."

How has the Honors College developed during its first decade?

"It has become more efficient," Dr. Renner replies. "It started out as a souped-up distinction program which gave superior students some special work to do. Now we have a better testing system, keep better records, and offer a wider variety of honors courses."

The program's very success has led to some problems. In the Arts and Science College alone, students eligible for honors work have increased by 25 per cent over the past year. Waiting lists are getting longer for honors courses — 99 students signed up for one course this semester that can accommodate only 25 students. Another honors course designed primarily for freshmen has four sections, but because of upper class priority, no freshmen have yet had the chance to enroll.

These problems exist despite the financial help of two Columbia residents who became interested in the Honors College about a year ago. They furnished the lounge of the new Honors Center and helped to establish an Honors College Development Fund. One reason for the financial pinch is that because of smaller classes and extra time devoted, it costs more than twice as much to teach an honors student as a regular student.

"Now we have our own equipment and expense budget for the first time," Dr. Renner says, "but we still need a larger staff. We also would like to do more in the area of guest lecturers who not only give speeches but who are willing to sit down afterwards and discuss their topics with the honors students." The Honors College director also encourages field trips and individual projects. Once he even helped a student track down a couple of monkeys for an experiment.

Who are the honor students? What do they think of the program?

Christy Bland, a senior in sociology, especially likes the general honors humanities course

and hopes a similar one can be started in the social sciences.

"The teaching isn't based on memorization," she says. "It's one of the few courses I know that shows you how everything fits together and really means something. You can't help but get caught up in it."

James Rulon, a junior in departmental honors whose major is creative writing, liked the comparative literature honors seminar best.

"It's taught by a French professor who gave us in the English department a different viewpoint—for example, that perhaps Shakespeare wasn't the greatest. I like the fact that the course is organized into periods rather than subjects, and that the students can go through the course pretty much at their own speed."

Several former honors students have written back to Dr. Renner to say what they thought of the program.

Jerry Redhage, writing from Fort Gordon, Ga., calls the honors courses he took "a challenge . . . a chance to dig a little deeper. . ."

Ruie Jane Pritchard, while finishing her graduate work in education, wrote "I profited immensely from the relaxed atmosphere. . . I've applied many of the techniques of honors class teaching in my own student teaching."

Sometimes there's criticism, but rarely complaining of too much work. Writes Heath J. Meriwether, from Newport, R. I., "I'm certainly glad I was in the program. . . it seemed challenging at the time, but now I think it could have been tougher, with more papers and more questioning seminars. . ."

In appearance, honors students run the gamut from beat to bookworm. "There is no typical honors student," Dr. Renner maintains. "If you can characterize them at all, you might say they are more vocal and more questioning than most other students. They're more open to different ideas. . . in short, more aware and concerned individuals." □

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