

STATUS REPORT

The Honors Core and Honors Curriculum

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I. Introduction

This status report is being coordinated with Dr. Linda Halpern's call for participation in the ongoing development of the five interdisciplinary Honors Core courses and in the revision of the Honors Program curriculum. Dr. Halpern became head of the Office of Undergraduate Studies in March 2006 and I became interim director of the Honors Program in May 2005, making this a period of transition, opportunity, and change for the Honors Program. In order to better facilitate discussion about the program's curriculum changes, this report traces the formation of the Honors General Education Committee, the development of the proposed Honors General Education, and the emergence of the proposed Honors Core. The report summarizes the conversations held with the General Education Program and impacted colleges, departments, and professors, provides descriptions of the proposed five new core courses, and an explanation of its place in a revised Honors curriculum. The report closes with frequently asked questions (FAQs) about the current proposal and possibilities for curricular development (page 8). Attached are two appendices: Appendix A (page 14) - a chart showing the proposed curricular changes; and Appendix B (page 15) - brief descriptions of the five Honors Core courses.

II. History

A. The Honors College Committee (2002-2003)

In academic year 2001-2002, the Division of Academic Affairs formed the Honors College Committee to investigate the feasibility of establishing an honors college at JMU. The nine-member committee was led by Dr. Kay Knickrehm and composed of faculty from all colleges of the university and from Student Affairs. The committee included one department head and representatives from the student body and the community, all of whom had been involved with the Honors Program at various times. The committee met in the spring 2002, when it formed a set of questions for consideration in consultation with Dr. Joanne Gabbin, then Director of the Honors Program. During the 2002-2003 academic year, the committee researched and met regularly to discuss what distinguished an honors college from an honors program, the reasons for having such a college, the appropriate circumstances for such an honors college, and what a model might look like. Their final report, dated Spring 2003, provided a 12-

page statement of findings and conclusions. In sum, the committee stated that JMU would benefit from an honors college, that an honors college should have a dean, designated space, designated faculty, financial incentives for students to enroll, and a core curriculum that fulfills General Education requirements. The report provided a proposed structure for a model honors college, including a curriculum that would include a total of 41 credit hours: 6 credit hours in the humanities, 6 credit hours in the social sciences, 6 credit hours in science and math, 9 credit hours of honors seminars, and 6 credit hours of the capstone project. However, that committee stated that JMU should proceed only if sufficient dedicated funds could be secured and that this funding did not exist. Following this report, the Honors General Education Committee was formed.

B. The Honors General Education Committee (2003-2004)

In November 2003, Dr. Gabbin formed the Honors General Education Curriculum Committee which was “charged with developing a curriculum for first and second year honors students that will satisfy their honors and general education requirements.” The eight-member committee was formed by Dr. Gabbin, who appointed Dr. Andrew Kohen as their chair; Dr. Gabbin and Ms. Karen Evans were *ex-officio* members. Funding for the process was supported by the Provost’s Office. During the 2003-2004 academic year, the committee researched and met to develop a proposed Honors General Education curriculum. The curriculum they developed was a 26 to 27 credit hour curriculum that Honors Program students would take in lieu of the university-wide General Education requirements. The proposed curriculum included five new interdisciplinary courses. The five new interdisciplinary courses are entitled: Ways of Knowing; Myth and Meaning; Great Questions; Social Science Concepts: the Global and the Local; and The Examined Life. They were imagined to count across the clusters and were not proposed to meet specific cluster requirements. Students would thus take a combination of honors sections of existing General Education courses as well as the five new interdisciplinary courses. The rationale for the Honors General Education (HGE) and the five new interdisciplinary courses are described in full in their report dated September 2004. The complete report is available online through the General Education website.

In October and November 2004, the Honors Program presented the Honors General Education report to the College Curriculum and Instruction Chairs meeting and to the General

Education Council. The Honors Program received several recommendations, including the request to develop full course syllabi for purposes of submitting the courses through the curriculum and instruction review process and to General Education. Dr. Gabbin identified several faculty members from the HGE committee to develop courses over summer 2005. These were: Andy Kohen (Economics) for Ways of Knowing; Karen Evans (Honors) for The Examined Life; and Dave Pruett (Mathematics) for Great Questions. In addition, Great Questions and The Examined Life were scheduled in the fall 2005 curriculum to be taught by Dave Pruett and Karen Evans respectively. They were taught in the fall term as honors seminars.

III. The Metamorphosis from Honors General Education to the Honors Core (2005-06)

A. Campus Conversations and Initial Course Development (Summer 2005)

As of May 2005, the leadership of the Honors Program changed from Dr. Gabbin to me, when I became Interim Director. One of my first tasks as Interim Director was to meet with Linda Halpern about the proposed Honors General Education and the five new interdisciplinary courses. She made several recommendations which I took to the faculty developing the courses. Following Linda's recommendations, I asked each faculty member who was developing a syllabus, to do so in consultation with prospective instructors. I provided them with a list of all past faculty members who had taught honors sections of General Education courses over the past few years. I asked that in addition to creating a draft syllabus, they generate a list of proposed faculty members, and a chart of how General Education objectives would be met for each course. By the end of the summer, Andy, Dave and Karen had all developed syllabi and a list of prospective faculty interested in teaching each course. As of August 2005, Kate Kessler, professor in the Writing Program, became interim associate director. She was charged with developing a syllabus for the Myth and Meaning course as well as identifying faculty.

As part of my goal to become acquainted with the campus leadership and departments supporting the Honors Program through course offerings and faculty mentoring of senior honors projects, I spent the summer of 2005 and early fall in over sixty meetings with all deans, most department heads, General Education Cluster Coordinators, and other faculty and staff. A significant part of these meetings included discussion of the Honors General Education proposal. Many department heads were enthusiastic about the course content. They also expressed a range

of concerns about staffing, the reduced size of credit hours, laboratory science requirements, student mobility in and out of the Honors Program, and other issues.

B. Discussion in Honors Program Committee Meetings (Fall 2005)

In fall 2005, during the monthly Honors Program Committee (HPC) meetings, we discussed the issues that had been raised and how to respond to them. Initially, the HPC voted to approve an amended Honors General Education curriculum with some additional laboratory requirements and to limit the new courses to only 40 of the usual 180 incoming students in the fall of 2006. However, subsequent conversations, including discussion with nationally-recognized Honors Program experts resulted in additional revisions. At the time I submitted this revised proposal to General Education in October, the Program requested that the five new interdisciplinary Honors Program courses conform to the existing General Education structure for a variety of reasons, including improving the ease of students coming in and out of the Honors Program. Kate Kessler and I consulted with two honors experts: Dr. George Maritz, Director of the Honors Program at Western Washington State, and Dr. Norm Weiner, immediate past president of the National Collegiate Honors Council and current Director of the Honors Program at SUNY Oswego. They agreed that the hybrid system proposed by the Honors General Education report was not ideal. The HGE report proposes a curriculum combining honors sections of existing courses with an honors core. Dr. Weiner also felt that honors students should take the same number of total credit hours of General Education as other university students. He also argued that the idea of an honors core is a best practice preferred over the idea of honors sections of existing courses.

C. The Current Proposal – the Honors Core

Based on my research into other honors programs, additional meetings with department chairs, and on the above-described conversations, I submitted a second revised proposal to the Honors Program Committee (Plan B or Honors Core) in our November meeting. At that time, I proposed focusing on the five interdisciplinary Honors core courses and abandoning the plan of an Honors General Education. Instead, the honors student would take the five courses described in the September 2004 report for a total of 15 credit hours counting towards their Honors Program requirements and their General Education requirements. Each of the five courses (Honors Core) would be proposed as a course counting for a single area in each cluster. Students would then need to complete their remaining General Education requirements through course

offerings open to all students. The Honors Program would continue to develop the courses in consultation with interested faculty and propose them as satisfaction of part of the university-wide General Education requirements. The HPC approved this plan in the December 2005 meeting.

In the December 2005 HPC meeting, the HPC also identified faculty members who would take the leadership in coordinating ongoing development and curricular approval of the courses. These five faculty members were charged with bringing the courses through the experimental course approval process, through preliminary review by the General Education committees for substitution credit, through ongoing development in conversations with interested faculty and past honors faculty, and through the final approval process. These positions are, of course, subject to change.

D. Other Changes and National Recognition

Other changes took place in the fall term. Ways of Knowing and Myth and Meaning were scheduled for the spring 2006 course offerings and are being taught as honors seminars by Andy Kohlen and Kate Kessler respectively. In consultation with Michael Stoloff, head of Psychology, and with Craig Abrahamson, professor of Psychology, we agreed that Craig would lead a revision of the Examined Life course. Finally, Dave Pruett and I had department meetings with Physics, Chemistry and Biology to discuss the Great Questions course. Many wanted to make sure that honors students were still meeting General Education laboratory requirements and/or that the course was taught by scientists. Dave and I also met with Kit Murphy (Biology), Cluster Three coordinator, and Herb Amato (Health Sciences), interim Cluster Three coordinator for spring 2006, to discuss how the course might proceed through Cluster Three. Due to Kit's sabbatical in spring 2006, Dave's sabbatical during 2005-06, the changes in Cluster Three, and the changes from the Honors General Education to the Honors Core, the course was not proposed to Cluster Three committee.

Finally, two Honors Program courses have received national recognition. Honors 183-Great Questions and The Rhetoric of Survival were both selected in a national competition to be published as model honors courses in the peer-reviewed journal, *Honors in Practice*. *Honors in Practice* is a publication of the National Collegiate Honors Council.

IV. Status of the Honors Core

After the HPC approved the focus on the Honors Core in December, I coordinated with the cluster coordinators to present each course to its respective cluster for experimental approval. I also renumbered the courses so that they would coordinate with the cluster structure. Four of the five courses received the signatures of contributing department heads and deans and now have experimental course status: Honors 181-Ways of Knowing; Honors 182-Myth and Meaning; Honors 183-Great Questions; and Honors 184-Global and Local. In spring 2006, Craig Abrahamson developed a revised proposal for Honors 185-The Examined Life. However, as of April 2006, this course is on hold in terms of its development since the Psychology Department is in the process of assessing its curricular priorities in the light of their recent Academic Program Review.

Three of the courses have been received an initial review by the General Education cluster committees and substitution approval for one or more semesters. Andy Kohen and I presented Honors 181-Ways of Knowing to the Cluster One committee. Gretchen Hazard, Cluster One coordinator, has approved the course for substitution credit for Cluster One's critical thinking credit for students taking the course in spring 2006 and fall 2006. Kate Kessler worked with Meg Mulroney, Cluster Two coordinator, to amend the proposed syllabus for Honors 182-Myth and Meaning. That course was presented to the cluster committee and approved by them for Cluster Two substitution credit. Kate Kessler and Laura Lewis (Anthropology) presented Honors 184-Global and Local to the Cluster Four committee; it was approved by them for Cluster Four substitution credit.

In fall 2006, at least one section of Ways of Knowing course will be offered. One or more sections of Great Questions, Myth and Meaning, or the Global & Local courses are tentatively planned for the spring 2007 term.

V. Frequently Asked Questions about the Honors Core and Honors Curriculum

The process of metamorphosis from the Honors General Education to the Honors Core has resulted in many questions raised by department heads, faculty and staff. The process has also provoked many larger questions about the entire Honors curriculum and the philosophy of the Honors Program generally. Some of these questions are raised below and could be a starting ground for conversation about the development of the Honors Core and about revisions in the Honors Program curriculum.

Q: What are the Honors Core courses?

Honors 181- Ways of Knowing, currently proposed for the critical thinking area of Cluster One.

Honors 182- Myth and Meaning, currently proposed for the historical, cultural, philosophical perspectives area of Cluster Two

Honors 183-Great Questions, to be proposed for Cluster Three, area to be determined.

Honors 184- Global and Local, currently proposed for the Global Experience area of Cluster Four.

Honors 185- The Examined Life, to be proposed for the socio-cultural dimension of Cluster Five.

Brief descriptions of these courses are provided at the end of this report in Appendix B (page 15).

Q: What is the rationale for an Honors Core?

The five interdisciplinary courses that make up the Honors Core are meant to be inter-dependent, to create a community among the Honors Program students, and to help promote the program to prospective students. All honors courses should incorporate one or more of the following attributes: interdisciplinary content, use of primary materials, writing intensive, independent research, discussion intensive, or other features that call upon students to develop high levels of critical thinking and writing. According to Norm Weiner, the idea of an Honors Core set of courses is nationally considered best practice over the honors section system in part because of the goal of creating a unique community.

Q: When will the Honors Core go into effect?

No course has been proposed for final approval at this time because development is ongoing. Four of the five courses were offered as honors seminars during the 2005-06 academic year: Ways of Knowing; Great Questions; Myth & Meaning; and The Examined Life. During the 2006-2007 academic year, the following courses will be offered with temporary General Education credit: Ways of Knowing (fall 2006); Myth & Meaning (spring 2007); and Global & Local (spring 2007). Great Questions is also scheduled for spring 2007 but has not received any form of General Education approval.

Q: Have the Honors Core courses been finalized?

No. Although some of the courses have been piloted as honors seminars and all have preliminary syllabi, all courses are under ongoing development. The Honors Program is interested in recruiting faculty who are able and willing to teach the courses they develop together. Courses should not be idiosyncratic or individualistic but structured such that different professors can teach them.

Q: When will the Honors Core be finalized?

When development is complete and they are ready for the final approval process. Most Honors Core courses have been submitted as experimental courses and have received temporary approval by General Education. Additional course development is necessary before these courses enter the final approval stage. If the Honors Core courses receive final approval as General Education courses, the curricular process and course development will always be ongoing since courses are subject to regular assessment and review every five years.

Q: How will Honors Core be assessed?

Since the Honors Core will be part of the General Education curriculum, honors students will be part of the pool of all students assessed on Assessment Day. Each Honors Core course will need to demonstrate that its course content meets the relevant cluster objectives.

Q: How are the General Education objectives being met?

As part of the development of each course, the development groups will need to document how course requirements meet the relevant cluster objectives.

Q: What are the science and mathematics requirements in the Honors Core?

Honors students will complete all Cluster Three General Education requirements. Honors 183-Great Questions will be proposed for one of the three new groups as determined by the course development group.

Q: Will students still be required to complete 41 credit hours of General Education?

Yes. All honors students will need to complete all university-wide General Education requirements, including laboratory science coursework. Honors students will only be different in that the five Honors Core courses are being proposed to satisfy one of each of the cluster requirements.

Q: Will substitutions be permitted for the Honors Core?

Probably. This question is linked to the question of how many credits students must take in the program to be considered Honors Program students, whether or not students can transfer into the program in their second (or sophomore) year, how transfer students will be treated, and so on. The question of what courses might count for substitutions is still under discussion.

Q: What will happen to the current system of waivers and credits for General Education courses?

There will be no change. Honors students currently receive waiver or credit for Advanced Placement, international baccalaureate, and dual enrollment courses as determined by General Education policy. Honors students often enter with at least two or three such courses. About half of all incoming freshmen honors students waive out of GWRIT 103. Anywhere from 20 to 40 students in the incoming class get credit for each of the following courses: Math 235, Political Science 225, and History 225.

Q: What will happen to the honors sections of General Education courses?

If the Honors Core courses receive General Education approval and adequate faculty interest to staff them, then the honors sections may no longer be needed.

Q: Will the size of the program change?

No change is planned. The Honors Program accepts about 180 to 190 students in the incoming freshmen class. Students usually take one or two honors courses per semester. Ideally, they will complete their Honors Core requirements in their first two years, but this will not be required since some majors such as Music have very tight schedules.

Q: How will the Honors Core be staffed?

One solution to staffing is to ask departments to trade their existing honors sections for sections of the new core courses. Another solution is to recruit new faculty into teaching for honors. Many faculty who have not previously taught honors General Education courses are interested in the new core courses.

Q: How has the Honors Program staffed its courses in the past?

Over the past several years, the Honors Program has offered 20 to 23 honors sections of General Education courses per semester. The program has historically drawn from all colleges but most heavily from the College of Arts and Letters for its teaching faculty. The departments that contribute regularly (and their per semester offerings) typically include: Philosophy and Religion (3-4 sections/sem); Communication Studies (3); Writing Program (2-3); Psychology (2); Biology (1), Economics (1), English (1), History (1), Mathematics (1), and Political Science (1). Other departments have contributed intermittently and some may contribute more with the new curriculum: Accounting; Art/Art History; Chemistry; Foreign Languages; ISAT; and Sociology/Anthropology.

Q: Will the Honors Core only be open to incoming freshmen?

No. It will be open to second-semester freshmen and first-semester sophomores since the new curriculum will replace the Subject-Area Honors. The question of which courses and how many will count for substitutions is still under discussion.

Q: Will students be able to join the new honors General Education after the first year?

Yes. The proposed plan includes phasing out the Subject-Area Honors (see below).

Q: Will Subject Area Honors continue?

Probably not. The Honors Program currently recruits students who have a 3.25GPA or higher and are in their second semester of their freshmen year or in the first semester of their sophomore year. The original Honors General Education Committee wanted to discontinue the Subject-Area Honors but permit second-semester freshmen and sophomores to join the revised Honors Scholar Program. By bringing together the Honors Scholar and Subject-Area Honors into one curricular plan, the Honors Program hopes to foster a more cohesive group identity.

Q: How will transfer students be treated?

There will be no change in policy. In the past, the Honors Program has received only a few transfer applications per year. Transfer students from other Honors Programs in the past usually have received up to 6 credit hours towards courses from that other university.

Q: Will the Honors Opportunity Program (HOP) continue?

Yes. No change is planned. All freshmen Honors Scholars are required to earn 50 points through attendance at the Honors Brown Bag talks, Honors Symposium, and campus events including public lectures, JMU conferences, concerts, plays, and art openings.

Q: What will happen to the honors option?

If the Honors Core is adopted, the Honors Program hopes to phase out the use of the honors option. The honors option is currently a practice offered by the program to students who are taking a 200-level course or higher in their major; the student must agree with the professor to take on an additional project, paper, presentation, or reading as more fully described in the Honors Program Handbook on page 20. The honors option often seems to be confusing to students and faculty and inconsistent in its application.

Q: Will study abroad still be encouraged?

Yes. It may be that study abroad should count as a substitution for honors seminars.

Q: Will students still be required to take two honors seminars?

Yes. This requirement will not change.

Q: Will students still be required to complete a Senior Honors Project?

Yes. This requirement will not change.

Q: Will the Honors Program continue the option of the Senior Honors Project only?

Yes. The Honors Program currently permits junior students to enter the Honors Program for purposes of completing a senior project even if the student has never previously taken honors courses at JMU. This practice will not change.

Q: Will the new Honors Core improve retention? Alternatively, what are the reasons that students leave the Honors Program?

Based on an informal study of the files of students who withdrew from the program from 1999-2004, we identified the following reasons for their departure. The vast majority left by their junior year because they did not have the required 3.25GPA in order to begin their senior projects. Another large group failed to stay active in the program's curriculum for reasons we were not able to determine. A smaller but significant group left JMU altogether. Only a very small number left during the Senior Honors Project phase due to problems completing the project.

Q: Will the new Honors Core attract better students?

We hope so but we are unable to make a determination at this time. Once the Honors Core is finalized as a curriculum, I will describe it in our brochures and in Choices presentations as a way of demonstrating the uniqueness of our program and as a way of differentiating college honors from high school honors in the minds of prospective students. Being able to promote nationally-recognized courses, such as Great Questions and Myth and Meaning, to prospective students is an important way of showing JMU's uniqueness and pedagogy.

Appendix A – The Proposed Honors Core

Comparison of the Current and Proposed Program Requirements

	Current Curriculum			New Curriculum
Title	Honors Scholars	Subject-Area	Senior Project Only	Honors Scholars
Admission	as first-semester freshmen	as second-sem. freshmen or first-sem. sophomores	as juniors	as freshmen or sophomores
HOP*	required first year	not required	not required	required first year
Gen Ed	3 honors sections (9 credits)	none in Honors	none in Honors	5 Honors Core courses (15 credits)
Electives	2 electives**	4 electives**	none in Honors	
Seminars	2 seminars	2 seminars	none in Honors	2 seminars
Senior Project	6 credit hours in major	6 credit hours in major	6 credit hours in major	6 credit hours in major
Credits in Honors	27 credits	24 credits	6 credits	27 credits
Graduation diploma & transcript	gold medallion Honors Scholar with distinction	silver medallion Subject Area with distinction	pin with distinction	gold medallion Honors Scholar with distinction

* **HOP stands for Honors Opportunity Program, a 50-point program to encourage freshmen Honors Scholars to engage in the intellectual life of the campus (lectures, concerts, plays, etc).**

****Electives can be one of the following: an honors section of a General Education course; an additional seminar; or an honors option course.**

Appendix B - Summary Description of Honors Core Courses

Hon 181: Ways of Knowing will foster critical and historical familiarity with the idea of the University and with the methodologies that inform the disciplines that constitute traditional universities. It will introduce students to a variety of “ways of knowing” (i.e. epistemologies) that includes a Western emphasis on empiricism and science and departures there from. Developed by Andy Kohen. Proposed for Cluster One, critical thinking.

Honors 182: Myth and Meaning will explore the importance and the power of myths (narratives that explain the origin of humans, natural phenomenon, and the customs, institutions and religious rites of a people collectively). by examining traditional oral and written narratives of various cultures and times. Inquiry will be facilitated by addressing several key questions: How does myth reflect and/or shape culture? What are prevailing myths of our time and culture? What are prevailing myths from other times and cultures? What are consequences to individuals and societies of loss of myth? What relationships exist in mythology and religion? What relationships exist in mythology and art? Developed by Kate Kessler. Proposed for Cluster Two, tier 1.

Honors 183: Great Questions. “Great Questions” are those that radically alter our perceptions of physical reality, of self, and/or of our place in the universe. For example, in *The Ascent of Man*, Jacob Bronowski observed of Einstein that he was “a man who could ask immensely simple questions” from whose answers he could “hear God thinking.” Einstein’s theories of special and general relativity each originated from simple questions and *Gedanken* (thought) experiments that can be readily grasped by ordinary persons. It is the answers that are extraordinary--so extraordinary that, when general relativity was experimentally confirmed in 1919, newspapers reported “Lights askew in the heavens” and “Newtonian ideas overthrown.”

The course will examine selected interrelated “great questions” from the domains of science and philosophy as well as their impact upon human perceptions of self and of physical reality. Because of the close historical connection between philosophy and natural philosophy (science), it is fitting that these two domains of inquiry should be considered in unison, as “inner” and “outer” approaches to probing the deeper mysteries of the universe. The great questions to be considered are to be drawn from three categories: 1) Where am I?—Questions of place and

cosmology; 2) What am I?—Questions of biological origins; and 3) Who am I?—Questions of perception. Specific questions may include, but are not limited to, the following: Does the earth move? How old is the earth? What is life? Is light wave-like or particle-like? Is there an objective reality? Developed by David Pruett. Proposed for Cluster Three, natural science group.

Honors 184: Social Science Concepts: The Global and the Local. This course has a dual purpose. First, it introduces students to key social science concepts. Using primary sources to the extent possible, students develop a critical understanding of units of analysis such as state, revolution, nation, gender, race, culture, class, freedom, and power. Second, through a variety of disciplinary perspectives, it applies those concepts to analyses of the ways in which human cultures and polities have exchanged ideas and developed power relations during different historical periods from antiquity to the present. The context is therefore global, with special attention given to the effects of global phenomena on specific localities. Developed by Lamont King and Laura Lewis. Proposed for Cluster Four, Global category.

Honors 185: The Examined Life. Students explore sociocultural and psychological aspects of personal belief systems, self-identity, and assumptions about others. The course aims to enable students to develop ethical and scientifically based critical thinking about human behavior and social interaction. This course has been specifically designed to adhere to the Mission Statement of James Madison University: "We are committed to preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens who will lead productive and meaningful lives." Honors 183 is designed for first-year honors students who are accepted into the Honors Learning Community and who are excited about intellectual discovery, personal reflection, active learning, and a conscious commitment of personal involvement essential to learning and growth. Developed by Craig Abrahamson and Karen Evans. Proposed for Cluster Five, socio-cultural category.