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# Challenging the Gifted Student

## *Honors Programs in Adventist Colleges and Universities*

By Albert E. Smith

***Moral education is impossible apart from the habitual vision of greatness. If we are not great, it does not matter what we do or what is the issue... The sense of greatness is the groundwork of morals.***<sup>1</sup>

**A**dventist colleges and universities have nearly open admissions policies. A student who barely made it through high school is accepted as an undergraduate on the same basis as one who excelled and could have entered the most selective institution.

Many good arguments can be made for an open admissions policy. But it also creates negative perceptions. The public has trouble believing that an institution can offer excellent educational opportunities for its well-qualified students when the school's identity is shaped by its commitment to openness of opportunity for everyone.

Concern about quality in Adventist higher education is heard from every side. In fact, doubt that Adventist institutions can provide quality education was one of the principal concerns identified by the Seltzer-Daley Report.<sup>2</sup> The report does not indicate whether the concerned persons are well informed, or whether they all have the same things in mind when they speak of quality. However, most would agree on one essential aspect of quality: Schools need to provide continued challenge and opportunity to students of all abil-

ity levels at every stage of their education. Gardner sums it up well:

College should be demanding as well as an enriching experience—demanding for the brilliant youngster at a high level of expectation and for the less brilliant at a more modest level.<sup>3</sup>

Increasingly, church members demand that Adventist education compare with the best available at any institution, public or private. How can this be accomplished at the college level, while still preserving a generally open admissions policy?

An honors program offers a good solution to this problem. Public and

students like? What do they accomplish?

### **Honors Students Are Real People**

When I think of the goals of honors education, I think first of the students: bright, articulate young people—well-prepared, with high expectations, interested in doing their best. I think of some of the positive and the negative experiences they have in college, and of their achievements after graduation. In what ways does an honors program serve them? Let me tell you about a few of them.

Stacy\* cornered me at a 10-year class reunion. A professional person of broad experience, she wanted to talk about the books we had read in her freshman honors seminar on science and culture. She articulately described the significance each book still held for her. In that class we had worked very hard to understand some difficult ideas. She recalled that pain. But she had found the ideas of value and wanted to know if those books were still being used.

Course objectives and the books used do change, but ideas continue to make a difference in the lives of people. My conversation with Stacy reminded me of the importance of college classes that introduce students to great ideas.

I talked to another of my former students a few days ago. Now attending a big-name professional school, Ron recalled "all that writing" at the undergraduate level. (Every honors course at LLUR includes a significant writing assignment.) He reminded me that I had once required him to do a fourth rewrite; he had definitely felt

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private institutions offer honors programs for much the same reasons. This article will focus on how honors programs at Adventist institutions challenge brilliant students to excellence.

Some Adventist collegiate honors programs have functioned for at least two decades, and most of the church's collegiate institutions in the United States now have an honors program of some kind. In this report, which makes no claim of being a comparative study, I shall most frequently refer to Loma Linda University Riverside (LLUR), simply because I know it best.

The article will address these questions: What is the importance of honors education? What are honors

abused. But in retrospect, he wanted to express appreciation. His honors requirements and double major gave him a distinctive educational background that was serving him well.

Though I had forgotten his paper, I remembered when, as a sophomore of obvious ability, Ron had considered a transfer to a big name university. He accepted counsel, remained with us, and now found himself fulfilling his ambitions.

Jeremy entered college with a sharply focused interest in physics. Having completed calculus in high school, he had the background and ability to excel in science and mathematics. He worked with a university research laboratory, publishing several scientific papers before graduation. His senior thesis will probably be published. But the honors program also required him to study broadly and in depth outside his specialty. As a result, he views science from a rich perspective. He has a full graduate scholarship from the government, and has enrolled in one of the nation's best graduate schools.

The experiences of Jeff, Angela, Dave, and Melissa show that honors programs encompass more than just academics. This quartet formed close friendships in their first year and supported one another through academic difficulties and personal trials. They studied, played, and prayed together.

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Campus spiritual activities were blessed by their contributions, student government drew their attention, and one of them pioneered a drama group in which they all participated. They excelled in their studies, too. Their paths have now diverged, as each attends a distinguished graduate or professional school.

#### **Honors Programs Do It Better**

No two honors programs are exactly alike, as each responds to local conditions. However, they do share a common objective. Honors programs address, in different ways, some problems that all colleges share in trying to offer quality opportunities to students with ability and motivation:

- General education can reduce to a common denominator of the ill-

prepared and the uninterested.

- General studies programs often lack coherence.
- Even in a scholarly community, there may be little opportunity for students to make an independent contribution.
- Even in small institutions a student can feel isolated.

Several aspects of the honors program at LLUR are more or less representative of such programs elsewhere. Honors general-studies classes complement a basic general-studies program in developing a coherent approach to learning. All honors scholars take a set of core courses. These courses have a common theme that helps to unify general education.

Other required courses change from year to year, thus allowing for lively discussion of the current interests of students or faculty. Among these courses, "Great Books" appears every year, but the teacher and the authors change. Another regular offering, available with a trip at spring break, is a religious and sociological study in Mexico. About one-third of the general studies requirements are fulfilled through honors classes.

Applicants qualify for the honors program through a combination of test scores and grades from high school. Once they are in the program, every effort is made to help them continue to achieve at an honors level. A cumula-

tive grade average of 3.5 is required before the student can register for the senior project.

Honors students prepare for their senior project by studying research methods and preparing a project plan during their junior year. This research or creative project offers a credit of 6-10 quarter units, and is generally done in the student's major field. All classes use the seminar format and require progressive experience in writing and experience in oral presentations, as well as small-group activities. In addition, honors scholars take part in social and cultural activities. Attendance at a concert, a lecture or a play, a hike in the desert, or a party at a faculty home may be included in the program.

Honors programs at other Adventist colleges are more or less similar to the one at LLUR. Southern College has a pattern of courses that the honors scholar elects to fulfill general education requirements. Southwestern Adventist College offers honors classes that enhance the general-studies curriculum. Walla Walla College has made its honors interdisciplinary courses part of a general-education program. Atlantic Union College has an honors core, covering about one-half of its general-studies requirements. This program has been recognized as one of the two most outstanding of 175 programs studied.<sup>4</sup> Andrews University's program offers honors sections of selected

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## ***How important is honors education?***

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courses and requires an honors project. The program at Pacific Union College has honors sections of departmental courses as well as honors tracks in other courses for general education. It also requires an honors project.

It is not my intent to make a comparative study or to judge one program as the best in the field. Each, in its own way, responds to the local situation. However, our experience at LLUR may provide some tips for success. Following are some observations about honors programs:

If general education is part of the program, it must not utilize the cafeteria approach. Distribution requirements are not enough; general education for honors students must stress relationships between the various disciplines. The honors portion of the general studies curriculum should be seen as an opportunity to look at the disciplines critically and to build bridges between them.

For the program to be effective, enough of the general education program must be offered in honors courses. The Honors Core Program at Atlantic Union College, which has close

to half its general studies as honors courses, appears to meet this requirement. At LLUR the program began with too-limited an array of honors offerings. We quickly found that a larger set, about one-third of total general education, was required to make an impact on the educational experience.

A similar point can be made about the senior project. This is not just a long term paper or another independent study project. It will have significance only when the college allows enough credit so that it can be a project of depth and can be successfully brought to a conclusion. LLUR's requirement of 6-10 quarter units provides the lower limit of what is needed. However, this is augmented by a prerequisite course in research methods. In this class the student prepares a project plan, determines whether resources are available, and obtains the agreement and cooperation of an adviser qualified to give direction to the project. With the plan in hand, the student is ready to go to work in the senior year.

### **Honors Programs Make A Difference**

In a class of honors students the difference is apparent. Students and teachers are equally enthusiastic. The class is active, responsive, argumentative, willing to get involved. Students,

for the most part, bring with them basic skills that enable them to excel. An honors class often stimulates lively discussion that spreads to dinner conversation or a late night bull session.

An honors program provides a center of collegiality that spreads beyond the student's major field. Even on the relatively small campus of an Adventist institution a student can feel lost and alienated. Although honors students are a diverse group, they see one another regularly and develop a group identity. Andrews University may have the best facility for encouraging this, a house dedicated to honors activities. Nevertheless, honors students are not isolated from the rest of campus life, but in fact are prominent in student government, campus clubs, and student missionary activities. Contrary to some fears, an honors program has proved to be a stimulus for student involvement rather than for elitism or snobbishness.

The level of student research or creative activities in the senior project or thesis greatly excels that typically done in directed study projects under departmental auspices. Honors students approach the project after in-depth preparation and with a commitment to see it through to completion. Both student and adviser have high expectations. After the project is completed, the presentation of the oral report, is a time for celebration in which faculty, fellow students, and parents all share. A number of honors projects have resulted in papers being presented at professional meetings or published in prestigious journals.

### **Honors Programs Provide an Impetus for Achievement**

It isn't surprising that honors graduates continue to be high achievers, since it was this characteristic that brought them into the program. What may be surprising are the particular opportunities that these people, graduates of rather modest institutions, are finding and making for themselves. As a group, they usually go on to professional schools. They are accepted to prestigious institutions in the United States and abroad.

I already knew that LLUR would have a small club of graduates at Yale next year. But in preparing this article I found that AUC, PUC, and Andrews would also have representatives there. Other graduates attend such places as Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Chicago, UCLA, USC, and Vanderbilt; and of course many attend Adventist universities.

Honors graduates go to medical schools, law schools, schools of busi-

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ness, and theological seminaries. Loma Linda University Riverside even has one graduate studying veterinary medicine. In their postgraduate work, honors students are studying in almost every imaginable field.

But all are not tuned to immediate further study. Some graduates become elementary or high school teachers. (A recent honors graduate of LLUR is teaching college mathematics in Central Africa.) They enter the ministry. They go into business. They marry and have families. The church and the world are enriched by their contributions.

### **Honors Programs Are Here to Stay**

These programs will become even more important to the Adventist insti-

tutions of the future. They have a well-established track record and a reason for being. The commitment to offer the best educational opportunity for the aspiring young Adventist will ensure the continued development of honors programs. □

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*\*Names in this article have been changed to protect individual privacy.*

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#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1929), p. 69.
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- <sup>3</sup> John W. Gardner, *Excellence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 101.
- <sup>4</sup> Lawrence T. Geraty, "Reclaiming the Vision of Adventist Education," *The Journal of Adventist Education*, 52:4 (April-May 1990), p. 7.