



# CHALLENGES FACING HONORS EDUCATION

**B**ecause they are part of a larger entity (college or university), Honors programs face many of the same problems as their sponsoring institutions: recruitment, retention, scheduling, and funding. However, Honors programs also face additional problems of definition and philosophy—what such programs are about, what benefits might convey to the student from being in an Honors program, and possible misperceptions of what Honors programs involve based on Advanced Placement classes in secondary school. Because I know it best, I will draw many of my examples from the program at Southwestern Adventist University in Keene, Texas, but other North American Division Honors directors have contributed some input to this article as well.

## **Recruitment**

One of the challenges we continue to face is negative perceptions of Honors programs. Students coming from academy or high school Honors programs and those who have taken Advanced Placement courses often believe that an Honors program is simply more *work*—more reading, more writing, larger projects. As we recruit, we try to counter that idea by explaining the philosophy of the Honors program and its curriculum. In brief, we tell them that the Honors program is not more work, but *different* work. We try to reinforce this idea each time that we develop new Honors classes and seminars or as new professors are invited to teach existing classes.

## **Retention**

Evidence collected over a period of years suggests that the national retention rate of Honors programs is lower than schools would prefer. A 1967 study reported in the *Journal of Higher Education* found only a 50 percent retention rate.<sup>1</sup> According to a more recent study conducted by John Cosgrove and published in the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, “results show that three out of every four students who begin honors programs fail to complete them.”<sup>2</sup> It would be interesting to see if Adventist Honors programs reflect this national rate. In the short time I’ve been Honors director at Southwestern, I’ve seen a retention rate of approximately 40 percent. Scholarships and more active advising do help retain more students in the program. It is still a struggle, however, to get students through the final projects of Honors thesis and thesis presentation. In some cases, students find the curriculum harder than they anticipated or are pulled away by competing programs and activities. Inevitably, some students are unable to maintain the required grade-point average.

## **Scheduling**

Because Honors classes and sections are not always part of the established curriculum, and many of the courses are team-taught, scheduling will always be a challenge. Here at Southwestern, we have tried to schedule Honors classes in fairly protected time slots, often evenings before labs or during lunch hours. To avoid conflicts with required courses,

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**International travel opportunities for Honors students often include visits to far-flung locations such as this visit to Guangzhou, China, by Union College students. Such trips enrich the lives of the students and give them invaluable experience with global issues.**

other universities use block schedules, often in the late afternoon or evening, or schedule Honors classes in time slots when multi-sectional classes are offered. Especially in small institutions, faculty are generally assigned full teaching schedules within their own departments, making it difficult to find people with flexible course loads or open hours. Of course, having a supportive and active chief academic officer who believes in the Honors program and is willing to adjust academic assignments and funding is a great advantage.

### **Funding**

When academic budgets are tightened, funding for Honors is curtailed as well. Particularly hard hit are funds for travel, conventions, social events, and additional salaries. Funding for international travel has always been a challenge.

### **Definition**

Adventist education follows the trend elsewhere: Students want to graduate with training for a specific career, or at least with the necessary prerequisites for graduate or professional training. According to John McDowell (director of the Honors program at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California), the problem is “convincing students who are often career focused that an education that involves the play of ideas for its own sake is valuable.” Trying to explain the benefits of an Honors program can be difficult—some benefits are tangible if there’s a scholarship involved; and recognition at graduation, social camaraderie, travel, and social events are good arguments. Telling students that Honors program participation contributes to acceptance into professional schools sounds good, but it is not always easy to demonstrate. I believe a true interdisciplinary

Honors program cultivates the mind and refines judgment. However, I'm the first to admit that the value of becoming a broadly educated human being is a tough sell these days.


### Philosophy

Often one advantage of Honors program classes is their interdisciplinary structure, giving the student multiple viewpoints on academic subjects. Yet, as mentioned earlier, scheduling and commitment of faculty members, all of whom have busy schedules, are problems. As Mark Peach (director of the Southern Scholars Honors Program at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee) says, "I feel my greatest challenge is restoring team-taught courses to their earlier status, taught by two professors in the same classroom each class period."

Despite past collaboration, certain departments' working relationships may have fallen apart for a variety of reasons. Peach continues, "These courses are still cross-listed, but lack the vital component of being team-taught. They are also not exclusively Honors courses, of which we have very few."

To gain membership in the National Collegiate Honors Council, for instance, an institution must have a certain percentage of courses that are designated as exclusively Honors classes. The problem with exclusive Honors classes is that they are often difficult to design and even harder to execute. True Honors classes must be designed with different content, approach, and philosophy from other classes. They must inten-

tionally raise questions and broaden students' horizons, engaging and inspiring them to become questioners who recognize the limits of their own understanding and seek to broaden their horizons.

And this is where Honors programs demonstrate their purpose, especially in Adventist institutions of higher learning: engaging gifted students in the life of the mind while training them for a life of Christian service. 



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### REFERENCES

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2. John Cosgrove, "The Impact of Honors Programs on Undergraduate Academic Performance, Retention, and Graduation," *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* (Fall/Winter 2004): [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_6947/is\\_2\\_5/ai\\_n28246632/?tag=content;col1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_6947/is_2_5/ai_n28246632/?tag=content;col1). Retrieved January 24, 2011.

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