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Honors Programs

Honors Programs at Jesuit Institutions: Learning and Joy

By Harry P. Nasuti

HONORS PROGRAMS: THE SAME BUT DIFFERENT

INTRODUCTION. Along with our invitation to the presidents to tell us about some one special example of excellence on each campus, we have focused on honors programs as a specific means of both challenging the more intellectually ambitious students and elevating the academic atmosphere of the institution. Here Professor Harry Nasuti of Fordham University offers an overall philosophy on what should be the goals of an honors program on a Jesuit campus. Then we follow-up with examples of what several campuses consider their “best practice” which others might want to imitate. **RASsj**

While of great importance for Jesuit education as a whole, the topic of this issue of *Conversations* has a special resonance for the honors programs that one finds at most Jesuit colleges. One naturally expects to find in these programs a commitment to excellence on the part of both institution and student alike. It is not surprising that the question of what such excellence entails should be a particular concern there as well.

Honors programs have existed at Jesuit colleges and universities since the middle of the last century. These programs attract very talented students, many of whom have chosen to attend their present colleges at least in part because of the opportunity to participate in their honors programs. These students usually shine during their college careers and go on to win competitive fellowships, study at the best graduate and professional schools, and undertake careers of distinction in a variety of fields.

As is the case with their honors counterparts at other universities, the curricula of Jesuit honors programs come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Despite their different approaches, these programs all challenge their students to develop their communication skills, analytical abilities, and research talents to the highest level. However, to describe honors programs only in such terms would imply an exceedingly narrow understanding of their commitment to excellence, one with which I suspect no Jesuit honors program would be content. On the contrary, these programs are much more inclined to see that commitment as rooted in a rich and multifaceted relationship between their honors and their Ignatian identities.

Between Honors and Ignatius: Towards a Deeper Understanding of Excellence

To understand the distinctive character of Jesuit honors programs, one might well begin by taking a closer look at the students who participate in these programs. The individuals usually sought by honors programs have something that in my talks to prospective students I describe as a “deep, dark secret.” These students not only excel in their studies but actually enjoy them for their own sake. They glory in the exchange of ideas, both in the classroom and the cafeteria. Above all, they tend to read without ceasing, well beyond what is required for school assignments in both amount and breadth.

In other words, the ideal honors student is an independent and active learner who possesses a vibrant intellectual curiosity. Not every high achiever fits this profile, and it is certainly the case that many honors admissions committees routinely pass over prospective students with extremely fine standardized test scores in favor of other talented students who have that certain intellectual “spark.”

One of the most important things that honors programs do is provide an environment where students both feel at home and are challenged to grow. For some of them, it is the first time in their lives that they have encountered a critical mass of their fellow students who are as intellectually passionate as themselves. Good things happen when students who are used to providing the defining insight in their classes

Contagious joy in the life of the mind

have to defend, and even change, their views in conversation with their equally perceptive peers.

At their best, honors classes are characterized by a contagious joy in the life of the mind, a joy that is often difficult to shut off at the end of the hour. Honors classes delight and reinvigorate the faculty who teach them. Their discussions go on to enliven other courses, extra-curricular activities, and late night dormitory conversations. In these ways, as well as by sponsoring lectures and other more formal events on campus, honors programs make a significant contribution to the intellectual life of the larger institution.

In broader terms, the presence on campus of a community defined by the love of learning for its own sake serves as an important counterweight to the ever-present tendency towards a more instrumental view of education that focuses on its usefulness for what happens after college. Without denying the necessity, legitimacy, or importance of professional training at our institutions, I would like to suggest that honors programs often provide a vital witness to a different vision of education, one more

Most Jesuit honors programs have a unifying vision

in keeping with John Henry Newman’s ever-radical view of the liberal arts as an independent and integrating endeavor. This vision, with its “contemplative” appreciation of knowledge for its own sake, is certainly no less necessary, legitimate, or important at our institutions – though it may well be more endangered, both there and in society at large.

Newman’s idea of a university is, of course, not necessarily the same as Ignatius’ idea of a university. As Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach S.J., noted in his 2001 address, “The Jesuit University in the Light of the Ignatian Charism,” the Ignatian view of education differs from that of Newman in that it is an “intellectual apostolate” with an explicit purpose – the service of faith and the promotion of justice. In this view, Jesuit education aims at the formation of a particular type of human being, one who lives one’s life for and with others. In other words, Jesuit institutions do not call their students to contemplation alone but to an ever-deeper relationship between contemplation and action.

How does this Ignatian vision manifest itself in honors programs at Jesuit institutions? Obviously, many honors students are active participants and leaders in their institutions’ campus ministry and community service activities. Indeed, a number of honors programs sponsor their own retreats and service projects and strongly encourage their students to undertake service and justice-oriented work after graduation. These activities are obviously important. Nevertheless, the real answer to the question that opened this paragraph needs to be found in the midst of the honors curricula themselves.

Especially supportive of their Ignatian identity is the fact that most Jesuit honors curricula tend to

have a unifying vision. While drawn from many different disciplines, the faculty involved in designing these curricula – and in staffing honors courses – have usually engaged in a wider conversation about pedagogical goals and methods. The result is that honors curricula are almost always a series of specially designed courses that build on each other over the course of four years rather than a set of unrelated distribution requirements. Since a number of these courses also tend to be interdisciplinary and even team-taught, this larger conversation usually continues in the classroom itself.

As part of this unifying vision, many programs include courses that require their students to grapple with what religious faith and a commitment to justice means in the modern world. Some explicitly incorporate Ignatian methods of reflection and discernment in courses that invite their students to examine their lives and to grow in wisdom and compassion. The increasing tendency to incorporate service learning in honors curricula fits in very nicely with both the methods and goals of Ignatian pedagogy.

Less overt perhaps, but just as characteristic of Jesuit education, is the way that many honors programs highlight the humanities, often by continuing to expose their students to the “great texts” that have long been the pillars of the western humanistic tradition. As Fr. John O’Malley, S.J., has noted in his masterful *Four Cultures That Shaped the West*, this tradition is marked by its explicit interest in shaping students’ character and its concern for the good of society. With its deep roots in Christian humanism, Jesuit education has been one of the foremost proponents of this text-based approach to fostering its students’ development as human beings. The important role

Studying texts fosters students’ development as human beings

such texts play in training the imagination and fostering depth of thought was recently reaffirmed by Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., the current General of the Society, in his comments at the 2010 conference on Jesuit Higher Education in Mexico City.

To the extent that they preserve a central role for the humanities, honors programs once again bear witness to a different vision of education, one that

according to O’Malley exists in a certain tension with the more specialized type of analysis that marks the modern research university. In this alternative vision, an analysis of *The Iliad’s* literary structure or historical accuracy complements, but does not replace, a more existential wrestling with Homer’s insights on anger, duty, honor, and shame. In other words, honors programs not only train their students to do research on significant texts (which, as Fr. Nicolás has noted, should not be restricted to the majority voices of the west); they also seriously entertain the possibility that such texts will transform the way that these students understand their own humanity and the way they interact with their fellow human beings.

Like the professional training discussed previously, the acquisition of advanced research skills in a particular discipline is necessary, legitimate, and important for students at Jesuit institutions – not least for honors students who write honors theses as part of their course of studies. However, it is also necessary, legitimate, and important to attend to how these students’ academic work contributes to their understanding of what it means to be human. Ultimately, the criterion of excellence in Jesuit education must take into account what kind of human beings our students become.

The Honors Community for Others

This essay has so far largely concentrated on some of the ways that honors curricula at Jesuit institutions express their programs’ honors and Ignatian identities. This focus on the curriculum is perhaps understandable, since it is participation in a special course of studies that distinguishes honors students from their fellow students. However, to do full justice to what goes on in these programs one needs to look beyond the honors classroom to the honors community. It is this community that both reinforces a wider concept of excellence and enables it to assume practical form.

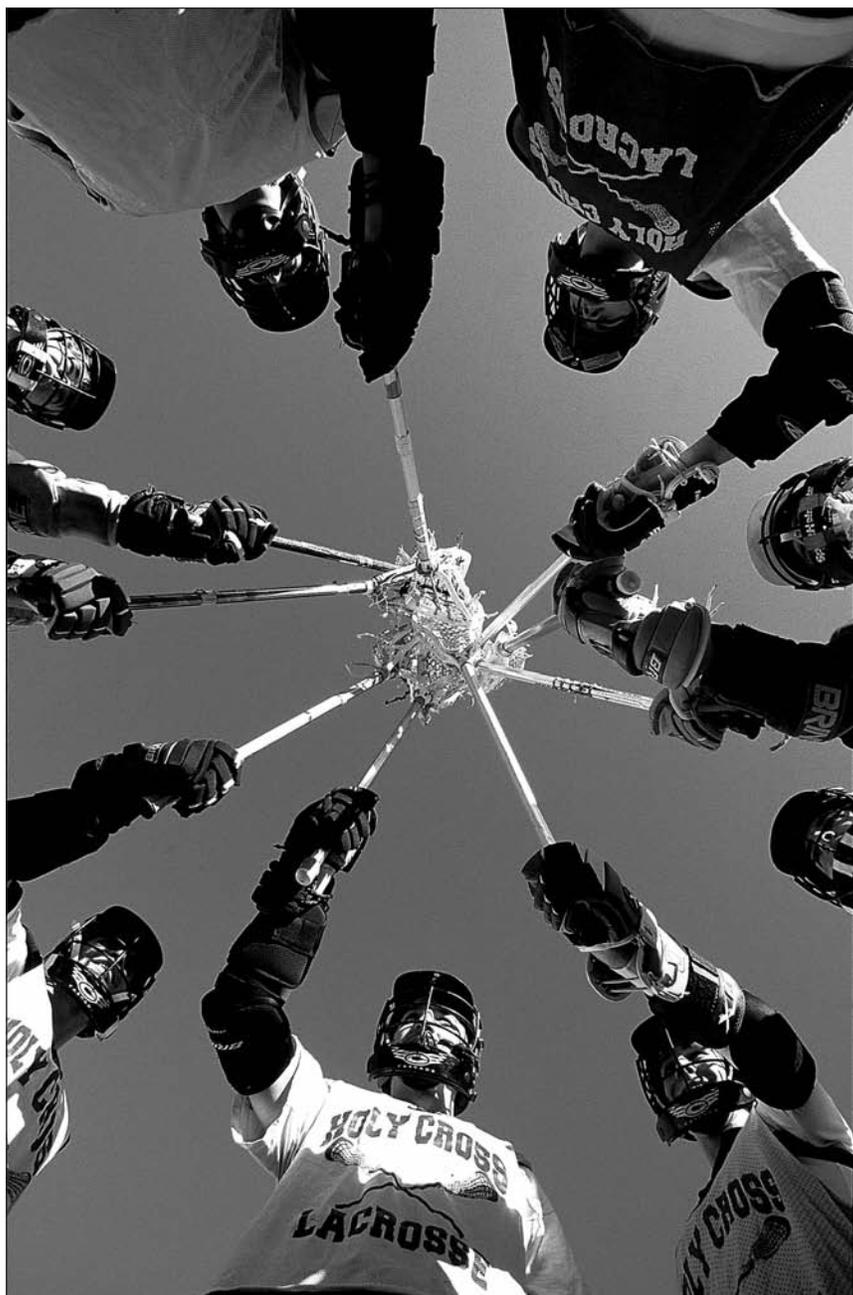
In contrast to honors programs and honors colleges at many larger state and private institutions, most Jesuit honors programs are small enough that students in a given year come to know each other fairly well. These students usually take a number of small discussion-oriented seminars together over the course of their college careers. They also participate in a wide range of extra-curricular activities, from social gatherings to cultural excursions, that bring

them into contact with each other on a regular basis outside the classroom. At some institutions, honors students are even part of the same residential community, at least for some of their college years.

All of this means that Jesuit honors programs are designed, on both the curricular and extra-curricular levels, to foster the development of a community in which personal and intellectual relationships reinforce each other. The wisdom of such a model is perhaps well attested by the recent introduction of a variety of “living and learning communities” at many institutions. These communities are a major pedagogical advance, especially at institutions that seek to actualize the traditional Ignatian concern for the education of the whole person.

Where honors communities may differ, at least to some extent, from many living and learning communities is in their inclusiveness and continuity. So, for example, some living and learning communities bring together students who have either a particular academic interest, such as science or politics, or a particular extra-curricular involvement, such as service or sports. Other, more inclusive living and learning communities are often situated in a particular year (usually the first), after which students either go on to more specialized living and learning communities or to other living arrangements with their friends. In contrast, honors programs purposefully seek to include students with a wide variety of academic and extra-curricular interests and to keep these very different individuals in extended personal and intellectual contact over the course of their entire college careers, even if they never live together.

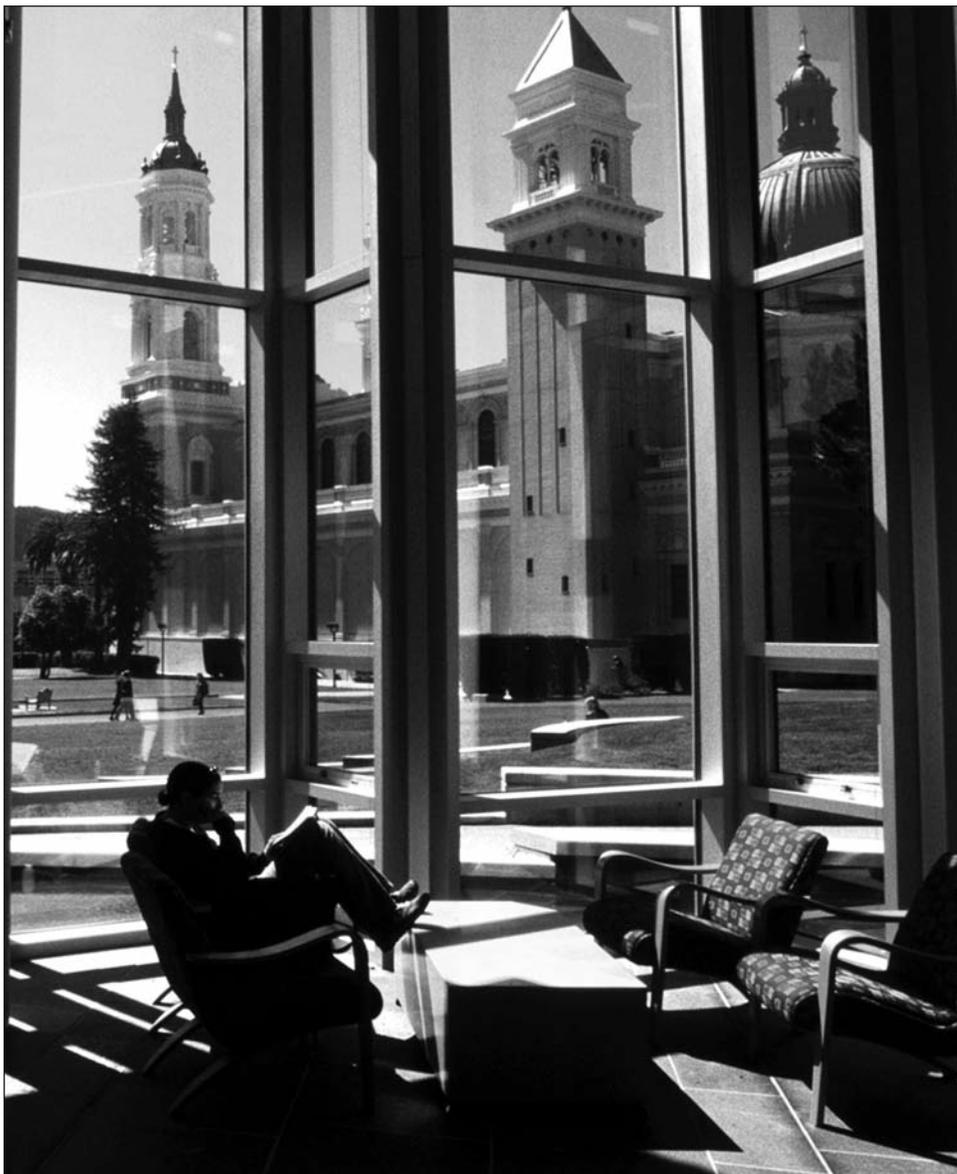
For Newman, it is the common presence and interaction of different disciplines that defines the university as an institution and leads to a wider but more integrated view of truth. Honors programs provide a curricular and extra-curricular structure that keeps scientists and English majors, as well as varsity athletes and social activists, in an ongoing personal and intellectual relationship. In so doing, pro-



Lacrosse team, College of the Holy Cross.

grams once again bear witness to Newman’s vision of the university, as well as to the Ignatian concern for finding God in all things. To use the language of Fr. Nicolás, honors programs engage in the “hard work of forming communities of dialogue in the search of truth and understanding.”

In an Ignatian institution it is at least as important that the honors community provides an opportunity for its diverse members to grow in friendship and compassion for each other. In this community, honors students not only receive “personal care” from their institution’s faculty and staff; they also are given the opportunity to show such care for their fellow students. The honors students with whom I



Library atrium, University of San Francisco.

the search for truth. In what many feel is an overly competitive and cynical age, it is a perhaps a powerful witness even to contemplate the possibility of a community defined by such lofty ideals as trust and truth – however imperfectly these ideals are realized at any given time.

The Many-Layered Excellence of Jesuit Honors Programs

Honors programs at Jesuit institutions routinely produce graduates that can easily be described as “excellent” according to anyone’s definition of that term. As a long-time honors director, I rejoice when the talented but tentative first year students that I welcome on opening day blossom into the class valedictorians and prestigious fel-

lowship winners that I always knew that they would be. I rejoice at least as much, however, when I observe the daily personal and intellectual interactions that enable these students to practice the virtues of wisdom and compassion and lead them to embrace lives of integrity and broad humanity.

To the extent that Jesuit honors programs provide the curricular and communal structures that make possible such interactions, they bear witness to a many-layered educational vision that includes not only academic and professional training but also an appreciation of knowledge for its own sake and a generous solidarity with others. The excellence proper to such a vision is one with which I suspect Newman and Ignatius, as well as most graduates of Jesuit honors programs, would be quite at home. ■

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Personal tragedies and deaths in families

work regularly take on mentorship and orientation responsibilities for new students, plan activities that enrich both the honors community and the wider college, and help with the basic grunt work that makes our program function. They also come together in impressive ways to support each other in times of unexpected personal tragedies, such as the deaths of family and friends.

These practical acts of mutual care do more than enhance personal relationships within the honors community. They also help to engender a climate of trust in which very different individuals feel secure enough with each other to take intellectual risks in