

## *The Tip of the Spear:*

# HONORS EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

*By Keri Myrick*

Whenever the University of Houston has mustered the will and the resources to compete at a higher level, Honors education has helped “move the needle”—President Renu Khator’s metaphor for positive change. “At its best, Honors has served the institution as a whole,” said William Monroe, dean of the Honors College since 2009. “Academically, Honors should be the leading edge for the University,” he said, “the tip of the spear.”

Today the Honors College is a point of pride at a Tier One university and nationally known as a pioneering model of undergraduate excellence. But it took many years and more than a half dozen attempts before Honors found the structure, resources, and consistent leadership that would allow it to play a significant role in moving the University forward. In fact, the development of honors education at UH in many ways paralleled changes in the University as a whole. For Honors, growth and critical development took place during periods of institutional flux: the years of rapid expansion following World War II; the Sputnik-era boom that spurred the development of honors programs nationwide; the University’s turn toward research in the sixties; the

arrival of Ted Estess as director of the program in 1977; the creation of the Honors College in 1993; the expansion of the M. D. Anderson Library, 2002-2004; and the changing of the guard from Estess to Monroe in 2009. At each of these junctures, the University turned to honors education as an instrument of institutional advancement.

## POST-WORLD WAR II

The first mention of “honors” in the University’s archives comes in the minutes of the Committee on Honors Courses and Graduation with Honors, chaired by assistant to the president and former comptroller and director of curriculum Walter W. Kemmerer in 1947.<sup>1</sup> The demobilization of soldiers after World War II and the financial support of the G.I. Bill affected UH as it did other institutions of higher education—bloating classrooms, stretching resources, and prompting questions about policies and practice.

With increasing enrollment, Kemmerer’s honors committee sought new models of undergraduate instruction but decided against initiating an honors program until the “special ‘honors’ courses have been developed and in operation for

*The Honors College frequently hosts lectures from renowned scholars, poets, and writers, like this talk by Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist John Updike, organized by Inprint in 2006.*

All photos courtesy of Honors College unless otherwise noted.



some time.” The committee recognized the immediate need to offer content-intensive honors courses that moved at an accelerated pace and demanded more of students, including extensive reading and critical thinking. The purpose of the proposed honors courses was “to make available to the superior students work of the highest caliber,” especially in entry-level courses where advanced students were overlooked in a swell of new enrollees.<sup>2</sup>

On October 23, 1947, the Honors Committee approved the creation of honors courses in algebra, analytic geometry, English, biology, physics, chemistry, and general business administration but, ultimately, did not offer them. Though history courses were not part of the initial plan, committee member Louis Kestenberg, a Polish immigrant whose field was German history and modern languages, took the initiative to offer “The Fall of the Roman Empire,” History 132H, in the spring semesters of 1948 and 1949.<sup>3</sup> With the University struggling to accommodate an onslaught of non-traditional students and returning veterans, it was almost a decade before another honors course was offered.

## THE SPUTNIK ERA AND THE SIXTIES

Six years before the University of Houston would become a state school, University president Clanton W. Williams established a second committee. In September 1957—a date later proudly noted as *prior* to the Sputnik launch, which a month later alarmed the nation—the Honors Program Committee began considering plans that included:

- a. *Senior honors courses leading to baccalaureate degrees with departmental honors.*
- b. *Provisions for outstanding students to be accelerated through certain courses.*
- c. *A detailed four-year “Special Program” of study providing major challenges to outstanding students.*
- d. *A weekly colloquium for all Honors students, to correlate and integrate information acquired in other classes.*

Williams had been convinced to revisit honors education not by Sputnik but by Marjorie McCorquodale, an English professor. McCorquodale argued that the University needed

a program for “superior students” if it wanted to compete with schools like Rice and Texas. Alfred Neumann initially chaired the committee, which was housed in the College of Arts and Sciences and made up of nine professors from departments including Engineering, Business Administration, Philosophy, and Education.<sup>4</sup> The committee spent months in rigorous negotiations to formulate a plan that defined the superior student and charted an enhanced, interdisciplinary course of study. In collaboration with the Counseling and Testing Office, the selection process for freshman students involved an evaluation of high school transcripts and SAT scores combined with face-to-face interviews. After countless hours of discussion and preparation, the Interdisciplinary [Honors] Program, known as the IDP, began in the fall 1958 with twenty-five freshmen and two senior thesis candidates. The committee appointed Kestenberg as the program coordinator.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the semester, however, the ambitious honors program that brought hope and excitement to the University had lost one third of its participants. Students’ exit interviews indicated that health and financial difficulties played a role in most cases, as participants not only undertook more rigorous coursework, they also frequently had jobs, families, and time-consuming commutes like their peers across campus.<sup>6</sup> Having seen the earlier attempt to establish honors education thwarted, Kestenberg knew the likely fate of the IDP if it lost students and credibility. With the help of Edmund Pincoffs in the Philosophy Department and Patrick Nicholson in the Office of Development, Kestenberg initiated a campaign to raise scholarship funds for IDP-selected students.

Meanwhile, the anticipated transition from a private to a state-supported institution promised students greater educational opportunities via reduced tuition, a significant benefit to those struggling to pay for their education.<sup>7</sup> Greater accessibility also meant greater enrollment, and the rush to attend UH was on—by those already working to save money for college and by students born in the post-war baby boom graduating from high school. A nucleus of faculty and administrators worried that UH needed greater selectivity in admissions and a strong honors program to assure its



Marjorie Nash mentors senior Jodie Fiore in 1987.

## Continuity and Change

Jodie Fiore came to the University Honors Program in 1983 from J. Frank Dobie High School in Pasadena. She was hired as a work-study student employee in the Honors office — then located in the basement of the M. D. Anderson Library — quickly became a leader within the program, and was elected president of the Student Governing Board in her senior year. She took several courses with John Danford, a political philosopher brought to the University by Ted Estess, and graduated with a degree in political science in 1987. While a student at the University of Houston Law Center, she worked as a graduate assistant to then associate director Bill Monroe. After completing her law degree and passing the Texas Bar, Jodie was hired as Coordinator of Academic Services. Over the next ten years, she saw the Program



*In May 2010, professors Richard Armstrong, John Harvey, and Hayan Charara led a student tour to explore Spain's heritage as a center for Muslim, Jewish, and Christian cultures. "The Convivencia Tour" gave students an alternative to the standard view of Europe as entirely Christian and "Western" in its orientation.*

national reputation and continued advancement.

In June 1962, the Honors Program *Committee* became the Honors Program *Council*. Appointed by President Phillip Hoffman, it took on the tasks of revamping the IDP curriculum, developing more sections of honors courses, and increasing University awareness of the program's goals and capabilities.<sup>8</sup> Across the campus, the little Interdisciplinary Program that still capped freshmen enrollment at twenty-five students had caught the attention of departments and colleges that wanted their programs added to the IDP course book. The program thrived despite financial crises, loss of faculty, and an ever-shifting core curriculum.

Other major universities, still reacting to the Sputnik wake-up call, sought to imitate what UH offered its top students: an honors curriculum of breadth, scope, and quality. "As you know," Neumann wrote to Kestenberg

on April 2, 1963, "universities and colleges are still asking for information regarding our Honors Programs (the most recent one, the University of New Hampshire)."<sup>9</sup> In 1964, Honors attracted 300 applicants scoring 1200 or higher on their college entrance exam. These achievements did not go unnoticed, and the University turned to Honors to "bring the [entire] campus up to a higher level."<sup>10</sup>

In May 1964, McCorquodale nominated Mary Ellen Goodman, a renowned researcher and a Fulbright Scholar, to replace Kestenberg as Honors Program Council chairman. Based on the recommendation of Dean Neumann, President Hoffman appointed Goodman the program's first director, effective June 1.<sup>11</sup> Goodman had joined the faculty in 1961 as a visiting associate professor when her husband, internationally known physicist Clark Goodman, was recruited to UH. A social scientist whose research fo-

become the Honors College, married Lorin Koszegi, an Honors classmate, and had two children, Jet and Zachary. Following a short stint as registrar of St. Johns School in Houston, she returned to the Honors College as assistant dean. In her current role she directs Honors recruitment, admissions, advising, scholarships, and housing while interfacing with almost every office on campus that deals with undergraduate academics or student affairs. "There have been many, many changes since I arrived as a very green eighteen-year old," Jodie says, "but the commitment to students and their development hasn't changed. The Honors family has gotten bigger—and older!—but we are still very much a family."

*Today the tables are turned as Jodie Koszegi, now assistant dean, mentors student Katie Jewett. Photo by Keri Myrick.*





*The first director of the Honors Program, Mary Ellen Goodman (center), talks with Velma Edworthy and Nurse Roberts before speaking to an assembly of the Medical Careers Club.*

cused on the psychological development of adolescent girls, Goodman immediately steered Honors in a more science- and research-friendly direction, a shift that Kestenberg had resisted. One of the first changes she implemented was emphasizing science in the mandatory junior-senior seminar “to supplement, to some degree,” as she put it, the emphasis placed on humanities during the freshman and sophomore years. Professor Phillip J. Snider, an accomplished geneticist fresh off a European tour promoting a paper on “genetic regulation of nuclear migration in fungi,” led the program’s first required science seminar, a “roundtable discussion” entitled “Science, the Scientist, and Society.”<sup>12</sup>

Goodman also lifted the cap on the number of entering freshman; redesigned the sophomore colloquium to enhance the interdisciplinary platform; added six hours of independent study for juniors to increase the number of senior thesis candidates; and swayed the registrar’s office to add an “H” to students’ transcripts, indicating an Honors course designed to challenge the individual with an accelerated curriculum or interdisciplinary content.<sup>13</sup> For the academic year 1964-1965, Honors enjoyed considerable growth and recognition, but burdening financial issues persisted, threatening student scholarships and forcing faculty to retreat to their “home” departments.

Meanwhile, the University was spending millions of dollars on research facilities and classroom buildings to accommodate its growing enrollment. In a 1961 issue of *Extra*, the UH Alumni Association’s newsletter, President Hoffman boldly proclaimed, “[UH] may become the largest University in the South.”<sup>14</sup> Some Honors students, however, found the emphasis on new buildings and research facilities problematic. An April 1965 editorial in the student-run IDP Newsletter expressed pointed dissatisfaction with

the general treatment of students and commended those professors who, in addition to their regular load, donated their time to teaching Honors courses with absolutely no monetary compensation: “We have people here dedicated to an ideal—that freedom of thought is more important than buildings ... Dreams are made of people—and the kind of people that build these dreams are fighting for an ideal on this campus.” One month later, Goodman resigned as director of the Honors Program, lost to a full professorship at Rice University.

On June 1, 1965, Phil Snider became the program’s second director, and within two years the IDP’s profile shifted from approximately 80% humanities majors to 50% science majors.<sup>15</sup> Snider served as director until 1970, and each year brought “record enrollment.” But behind the scenes, budgetary insufficiencies and faculty shortages handicapped the program. Soon, political and social events—the Vietnam War, racial tension, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the fear of global communism, and widespread student protests—eclipsed honors education at Houston and similar initiatives nationwide. Harried administrators of the University neglected undergraduate excellence to concentrate on sensitivity training, emergency planning, and group dynamics. By the end of the 1969-1970 academic year, Honors lost yet another director, a pattern repeated almost annually until the mid-seventies, when a chance encounter of two people, Donald Lutz and Ted Estess, began a process that stabilized the program, brought consistent leadership, and put a stamp on Honors education that remains today.

## THE EARLY ESTESS YEARS

The early 1970s represented a fallow period for Honors at the University. When political philosopher Donald Lutz became director in 1976, UH still failed to offer compensation or release time from teaching for the position. Lutz accepted on the condition that UH bring in a consultant to assess the program and clarify its potential importance to the University. He recommended Ted Estess, then at the University of Montana, whom he had met through a series



of unlikely coincidences at a National Collegiate Honors Council convention. Estess, a scholar of religion and literature, served as consultant for academic vice president Barry Munitz and drafted a seventeen-page report

*Ted Estess headed the University Honors Program and the Honors College from 1977-2008.*

Photo courtesy of University Archives, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

recommending a larger, university-wide program and charting a course forward.

Estess's site visit and subsequent report convinced Lutz and Munitz that Estess was the academic leader that the program and the University needed. Munitz offered Estess the position, and, after some hesitation and negotiation, Estess came to Houston in January 1977 to launch a re-named University Honors Program with expanded ambitions and responsibilities. For the first time, the program had a budget for a director and associate director—conditions for Estess taking the job—as well as modest funding for scholarships and a lecture series. Stephen Langfur, a philosopher, was recruited from Syracuse to be the first associate director.<sup>16</sup>

Estess and Langfur, joined by classicist Anthony Sirignano in April, determined that the most important first step involved creating an enhanced common curriculum, and, further, that a team-taught, “great books” course would provide the range and intensity needed to give Honors students of all majors a distinctive and lasting experience. A defining characteristic of UH Honors, “The Human Situation” class, named by Langfur, was born, and “excellent faculty were put into undergraduate classrooms with the best students.”<sup>17</sup> This two-semester course, affectionately dubbed “Human Sit” by students and faculty, further developed the IDP’s goal of integrating disciplines, specifically through team teaching and the critical reading of texts: “the Greek, Roman, Hebrew, Christian, and Islamic cultures of antiquity” in the fall, and selected texts of “modernity”—roughly Dante through the present—in the spring. After thirty-five years, the objectives of the course remain to develop skills such as close reading,

careful writing, and critical thinking, and at the same time to invite students of all backgrounds and majors to participate in what has been called “the great conversation.”<sup>18</sup>

Allen Mandelbaum, a scholar, poet, and translator visiting the University from the Graduate Center at CUNY, stated well the rationale for the program and the need for academic scholarships: “The budget of the University does not now include truly competitive student support for the very finest students in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences on a four-year scholarship basis,” he wrote in a January 5, 1980, letter to Estess. In Mandelbaum’s view, such students “could only be drawn to the University of Houston by a strong Honors Program. Conversely, without such an Honors Program, one cannot in bona fide summon students of that kind and attend to their intellectual needs.” With the help of an aggressive scholarship program supported by President Richard Van Horn and Dean of Admissions Wayne Sigler—including, beginning in 1983, “full ride” support for National Merit Finalists—the number of Honors students grew and the program flourished.

## THE HONORS COLLEGE

The rapid growth of the program raised again the question of the place of Honors education at UH. In 1988, Senior Vice President Robert Lineberry created a task force, chaired by Harrell Rodgers, dean of the College of Social Sciences, “to look into the possibility of creating an Honors college.”<sup>19</sup> Although the Undergraduate Council reviewed the proposal favorably in fall 1989, council members expressed concern over funding. “I strongly endorse this [proposal] if we have the money,” council member

*Students representing interdisciplinary Honors minors—Medicine & Society, Politics and Ethics (Phronesis), and Creative Work—participate with Professor Robert Cremins in a college-bowl style game called “That’s Not My Field!” Visible on the left is the Estess Alumni Library, a premier seminar space that houses bound copies of all the senior honors theses completed at UH.*





The fall 2004 UHALUMLINE featured the official spirit group of the Honors College—the Bleacher Creatures. Shown center, left to right are alumni Bill Kelly, Beth Kungel Borck, and Dave Armendariz. Cover courtesy of UH Alumni Association.

Ernst Leiss, a professor of computer science said. “But if we go ahead without the money, we could get into a fiasco.”<sup>20</sup> With the support of President Marguerite Ross Barnett and, following her untimely death, President James Pickering, the Board of Regents unanimously approved a proposal to create an honors college in July 1992. The Texas Coordinating Board of Higher Education voted in favor of the University’s proposal at its January 1993 meeting.

For a week during the summer, seventh- and eighth-graders can preview college courses at the Cougar Junior Scholars Camp in the Honors College. Classes taught by UH professors include English literature, creative writing, engineering, and chemistry.

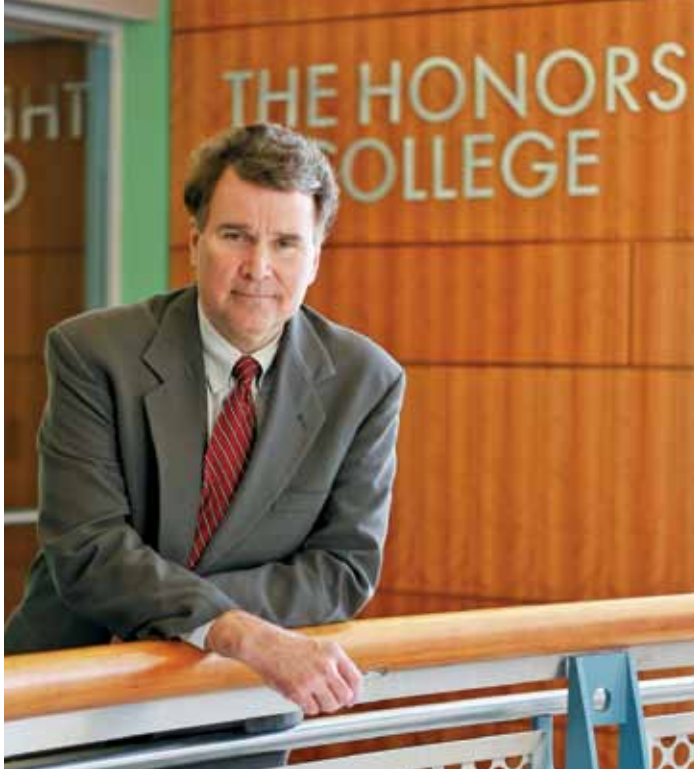


In many ways the replacement of the University Honors Program by the Honors College was symbolic, a certification of the program’s growth in size and comprehensiveness. Professor John Bernard seemed skeptical: “I’m not sure how simply changing the name will make a difference,” he commented. “It’s a good sign, but it may be only a sign.”<sup>21</sup>

Bernard’s concern proved well-founded. In one very important respect—physical space—the Honors College remained a program. As early as 1988, the Rodgers Task Force had strongly urged that the new college move from its overcrowded space in the basement of the library. “Toward the 21st Century: A Plan for the University of Houston, 1990-1996,” a strategic planning document, called for a residential honors college to be located in a renovated Quadrangle.<sup>22</sup> Yet not until 1999 did President Art Smith announce plans to include the Honors College in a new wing of the M. D. Anderson Library. Five years later, the construction was complete.

Other than the administrator’s offices, Honors had been located (sequentially) in a library storage room that only required “a combination lock to look . . . like a banker’s safety deposit vault”; the Ezekiel Cullen Building in a room only available to students weekdays from 1:00-5:00 p.m.; three offices in one of the WWII Quonset huts; and, for twenty-five years, in the library basement with a “lounge” that opera director Peter Sellars described as “the ugliest room in America.”

During the 2002 Thanksgiving holidays, the College transferred its classrooms, faculty offices, student service facilities, and lounge to three trailers near the Law School. During spring break 2004, the College moved into an attractive, functional, and “rather cushy” space, in the words of one Honors student, on the second floor of the new library addition.<sup>23</sup> The new space includes a beautiful Honors Commons used by students as a place to study and often adapted for formal lectures, dinners, recitals, dance performances, plays, and parties. It has four seminar rooms, including the cherry-paneled Estess Alumni Library, a student computing lab, a student services center, and offices for at least twenty faculty and staff. In a real sense, the Honors College had arrived.



Having served the Honors College since 1985, Bill Monroe became dean in 2009. The location of the Honors College in the M. D. Anderson Library reflects its centrality to the mission of the University. Photo by HYPERKULTURMEDIA | Mauricio Lazo.

## THE MONROE YEARS

William Monroe, who since 1985 had served as associate director, associate dean, and executive associate dean under Estess, was appointed dean of the Honors College in January 2009 by interim provost Jerald Strickland. With President Renu Khator seeking Tier One status for the University, she and Provost John Antel turned to Monroe and the Honors College to help attract a larger cohort of academically talented and motivated undergraduates. A driven, entrepreneurial staff that included six Honors alumni responded to the challenge. For twenty years, Honors College enrollment had hovered between 1,000 and 1,250 students, but in 2009 the needle began to move dramatically. By fall 2012, the number of Honors students exceeded 1,500, an increase of 40% in roughly three years. The combined math+verbal SAT average for incoming freshmen increased to 1316, the highest ever, and the class included fifty-eight “Tier One” Scholars and thirty new National Merit scholarship recipients.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to expanding the number of students, faculty, and staff, the Honors College has added courses in the sciences, engineering, and business and is proposing a new honors program within the College for students intending careers in the health professions. With three interdisciplinary minors—Medicine & Society, Politics and Ethics (*Phronesis*), and Creative Work—the College has developed extensive offerings at the upper-division level and is again the envy of institutions around the country. The Human Situation course is stronger than ever, with two teaching teams, thirty small sections, and seventeen faculty, representing disciplines such as philosophy, political theory, English, rhetoric, creative writing, and history.

While the concept of Honors education has been im-

portant to the University since the years following World War II, the actual role, structure, and physical location of Honors has been in flux. Many times over the years, an organized program supporting undergraduate excellence across colleges and disciplines appeared at risk and, as a hallmark of the institution, was passed over as more urgent concerns—graduate studies and research, physical plant repairs and construction, cutbacks in state support, departmental, and disciplinary priorities—took precedence. But the Honors College continues to flourish, in many ways more than ever, with an entering class of over 600, a dedicated faculty, and a friendly, hard-working, and professional staff.

With the recent dramatic enrollment increases, space has again become a limiting factor. The College has outgrown its premier space in the library and will be locating some of its faculty and functions in rehearsal rooms on the auditorium side of the Ezekiel Cullen building and elsewhere on campus. “We hope to find appropriate quarters for our students and programs soon,” Monroe said. “This kind of growth—in both size and quality—is a good problem to have. But it’s still a problem,” he added. “In many ways, the questions raised by Ted in his 1976 consulting report are still valid. We should always be asking, ‘What is the place of Honors education within the University and how does Honors relate to the other concerns of the University?’ The ways we respond to these questions,” Monroe said, “will shape the character, reputation, and core values of our institution and, ultimately, the city of Houston itself.”<sup>25</sup>

Keri Myrick was recruited to the Honors College in 2011 as a high-achieving mid-career student. A Fine Arts (Painting) major minoring in Creative Work, Myrick has travelled with two study abroad groups, studied the Human Situation, participated in Undergraduate Research, and launched the Honors History Project, an ongoing public history of honors education at UH based on archival documents, photographs, social media posts, and interviews with students, faculty, and staff, past and present. To contribute, contact Keri Myrick at [hhistory@central.uh.edu](mailto:hhistory@central.uh.edu).



When Dean Bill Monroe hosted an all-night reading of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, participants got into the spirit with their costumes.