

8 September 2009

Dear Colleagues,

For the freshman Honors class of 2009 we again received over 2700 applications, this time for 225 slots, a planned reduction in admissions based on budgetary uncertainty. Once again, we had to turn away many students who were well qualified to enter our program. We kept a very large waiting list this year, one that reflects the quality of our applicant pool, but in the end we only turned to some 15 on that list to come up to our target of 225 students. We continue to be struck by the excellent job that Washington High Schools, public and private, do in preparing students for college in general and for Honors programs in particular and are frustrated by our inability to accept more of your students. You should know that we are currently updating our curriculum and, if all goes well, the new requirements will go into effect in Autumn 2010. While the core values of the Program and the small and engaging nature of the courses will remain the same, the changes will place further emphasis on the importance of experiential learning, critical reflection, and a broad understanding of the interconnectedness of knowledge.

As in the past, when reading files we try to identify those students whose files suggest that they are not only academically prepared for the UW Honors Program, but who are also in tune with programmatic values. In order to do this, we read the files carefully and fully, looking at GPAs, SAT/ACT scores, extracurricular activities, essays, and letters of recommendation. Everything is considered in the process and we ultimately select for admission those whose achievements, aspirations, and attitudes toward education suggested that they would gain most from and contribute to the program.

In order to provide some assistance for you in advising your students, I am sending a document that I hope will clarify what we are looking for in applicants to the program. It is my hope that you can help students decide if what we are offering suits both their short-term and long-term goals.

Thank you for recommending the UW Honors Program to your students. We look forward to working with you in the years ahead.

Sincerely yours,

James J. Clauss
Director of Honors and Professor of Classics

University Honors Program at the University of Washington

Traditionally, honors programs at universities have attracted the most talented and ambitious students in high schools, students who have taken a number of Honors, AP, and IB courses and thus students who have been prepared for university honors programs by parents, teachers, and counselors. These students have also been among the most active outside of the classroom, participating in various extracurricular activities (sports, music, service projects, etc). As we have learned over the years, a large portion of this group who apply to university honors programs have chosen to do so (1) as an extension of their advanced high school programs, (2) for the recognition acceptance brings, (3) for the smaller classes such programs offer, (4) with the expectation of being part of an elite group of the best and brightest, and/or (5) with the hope that completion of a university honors program will secure admission to graduate or professional schools after college. While some of this is true, the UW Honors Program offers to and requires of its students far more.

The Honors Program at the University of Washington has developed values, goals and outcomes that are essential for potential students to understand before beginning the application process. With regard to the points listed above:

1. Advanced courses in high school, whether Honors, AP, or IB are significantly different from our Honors core courses. The latter attempt to get students to see beyond the disciplinary boundaries established in the typical high school curriculum and to understand the interconnectedness of all knowledge. Not infrequently, Honors students enter college with an eye toward acquiring expertise in a particular field (e.g., medicine, engineering, business, international studies). The continuation of a highly compartmentalized understanding of education, combined with the ambition of getting into the best post-graduate institution, often leads to resentment at having to study topics outside of the student's chosen discipline(s). Students who want a more streamlined course of studies that supports a more focused approach to education might not consider the University Honors Program appropriate for their purposes.
2. The University Honors Program is indeed a highly competitive program and acceptance does set the admitted student apart. But such recognition alone will not lead to satisfaction if the student's goals are out of sync with the program's values that also include community, diversity, leadership, lifelong learning, global and community engagement, and research.
3. UW Honors core courses are indeed limited to between 25 and 35 students, and students in these classes are among the most accomplished at the university. But these courses represent only a third of the required credits to graduate. At some point during students are likely to find themselves in a class of several hundred students over the course of their study here. Students entering the UW Honors Program need to realize that they are also attending a large public university—

one that offers amazing opportunities not available at small colleges. The UW Honors Program, among other things, does make the university seem smaller, but it does not isolate its students from the larger university community.

4. Students accepted into the Honors Program are indeed among the best and brightest, but applicants should be aware of the fact that we employ a holistic approach to reading applications. The valedictorian of a class with 2400 on the SAT and a 4.0 overall GPA with lots of extracurriculars may not be admitted into the program if her essay makes it clear that she is not interested in pursuing a broad-based education. We are looking for those students who not only show academic ability and promise, but whose goals for their education include and also transcend a future career; in particular, we prefer students who are intellectually curious and willing to take academic risks in order to expand the boundaries of their knowledge. For in doing this, such students are the ones who are more likely to expand the boundaries of knowledge in their fields after graduation.
5. Envisaging Honors as a fast track to a graduate or professional program is not only out of sync with the philosophy of the program, more importantly completion of this or any honors program does not in itself guarantee admission into any program. It is but one of numerous factors that are taken into consideration by program evaluators at the graduate level. Graduation from the UW Honors Program has indeed contributed toward future academic and professional success for the majority of our students, but it is our goal that graduates of this program leave the UW not only experts in their chosen fields but also committed to continuing their education both professionally and personally, serving their various communities as leaders, and engaging the world as global citizens.

Surveys submitted by those attending the UW Honors Program have shown us again and again that students who enter the program for the wrong reasons either end up leaving or completing it with less satisfaction than anticipated. It is critical, then, that students, parents, teachers, and counselors consider the values and goals of the UW Honors Program before applying. Students who commit to our broader concept of a college education uniformly report that they have been transformed by the experience. It is this quality that makes our program truly distinctive.