

Report from the Honors College Exploratory Task Force (March 14, 2014)

I report as head of a task force that consists of Eric Sandgren (EIT), Ann Robinson (Education and Health Professions), Simon Hawkins (Social Sciences and Communications), Laura Smoller (ALS), Matthew Gifford (ALS), Andy Terry (Business), Rizan Mohsin (student), Priscilla McChristian (chancellor's office), Dean Kahler (VC for enrollment management), and Georgia Mjartan (alumna), with Earl Ramsey acting as an advisor to the group.

The group was formed in December and given the following missions : 1) to determine if UALR is ready to have and will benefit from having an Honors College, and 2) to recommend the Honors College model that best fits the institution, given the vision that UALR become "one of the top metropolitan, community-engaged, research universities among the sixteen members of the Southern Regional Education Board." It was made clear from the first that any new Honors College will include (but be larger than) the Donaghey Scholars Program, which is to remain intact. We were also strongly urged to consider the university's strength in community engagement. Ideally, this new Honors College would enroll its first students in August 2015.

After meeting with Earl Ramsey, who enthusiastically recommended that UALR move with all deliberate speed to develop an honors college, the members of the task force informed the Provost in early February of our determination that UALR is ready to have and will benefit from having an Honors College. Based upon our recommendation, the Provost has instructed the search committee looking for the new head of the Donaghey Scholars Program to consider that candidates for that position should also be looked upon as potential candidates for dean of a new honors college.

The task force has since then explored a number of models of other honors colleges and has begun to sketch out what an honors college at UALR might look like. I should emphasize that any ideas I share with you at this moment are preliminary and subject to further debate and refinement. We envision a structure consisting of two large strands: the Donaghey Scholars (at the current size of 100 students) and a second strand of students pursuing University and College honors (perhaps consisting of 200-240 students). These latter two groups are composed of students entering as freshmen (University honors) and those who transfer in after the sophomore year (College honors). University and College honors students in the third and fourth years will be given the choice of more intensive work leading either to a research project or substantive creative endeavor, in the first option, or to a service learning project, in the second option. The college will thus accommodate 1) those who desire a rigorous, prescribed curriculum (the Donaghey Scholars Program as it stands), 2) those who wish a more intensive experience leading towards a capstone project involving research and/or creative endeavors, and 3) those who seek a more challenging education culminating in a service learning capstone project. Throughout the honors college, coursework as well as extracurricular activities will focus on engagement with the the urban and global community, as students apply insights from the classroom to their interactions with the interconnected world in which we live and use the metropolitan environment as their laboratory.

As we move forward with our planning, a major goal is to create an inclusive learning community for the honors college students that challenges and nourishes talented students from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. We will recommend an admissions process that is not simply numbers based but that casts a wide net that will assure us a diverse group of honors students. We are excited about the benefits that an honors college will bring not just to the students enrolled in it, but to all students at UALR and indeed to the university and community at large.

UALR already has the majority of the financial resources available to accommodate these additional honors students. Our analysis of college-bound students in Arkansas and surrounding states indicates a more than ample pool of potential applicants. We believe that the time is ripe for us to move forward with creating the only honors college in the state of Arkansas that will allow students to be immersed in the urban laboratory.