

MEMORANDUM

To: Academic Senate
From: Telford Work
Re: Westmont honors program
February 20, 2009

When I became honors coordinator, I inherited from Patti Hunter an embryonic vision for a formal honors program at Westmont. This year I have been given a special opportunity to develop that vision further. I will be discussing this effort in the senate meeting on Tuesday, February 24. Here is background information to speed that discussion.

Structure. The school already offers a (declining) number of honors-only sections, and some faculty offer in-course honors as components of their courses. On our own initiative, some teachers of GE and major courses have been developing strategies for regularly incorporating honors students, either with honors sections or with in-course honors options.

The elements already in place – major honors, honors sections, and in-course honors – can be grown into a ‘core’ that brings honors program students together enough for honors-level education to achieve ‘critical mass’ as a program in its own right. An honors program student would need to maintain a qualifying GPA and take a minimum proportion of honors units as part of his or her course load. There would be no special admissions procedure, though we could consider requiring Monroe Scholars (and perhaps Presidential scholars) to participate. We would also hold a special orientation at the beginning of students’ first semester, and occasional special extracurricular events during the year. The honors program designation would appear on a student’s diploma only if he or she graduates with a minimum number of (32?) honors units.

Features. This program:

- provides ways for honors program students to interact, gain a sense of camaraderie, and engage the GE curriculum, their majors, and their whole Westmont life.
- leaves our individual academic departments in charge of contributing or not contributing to the program.
- integrates with major honors programs but does not require departments to develop those programs (though we do need a sufficient level of overall participation).
- keeps honors students together enough for them to form academic and personal bonds that last through college, while also keeping them integrated with other students. In this way all students benefit from the program, not just its direct participants.
- is attractive to prospective students who are high academic achievers without alienating prospective students who cannot or do not wish to participate.
- allows students to enter (in their first year), continue, or drop the program on their own initiative insofar as they are qualified.
- needs no special application process or additional administrative overhead.
- operates at low cost to the college.
- provides a good fundraising opportunity for the Office of College Advancement and a way to leverage Westmont’s strengths in ways appealing to prospective students, alumni, and donors.

Needs. My hope is that departments that teach courses in the GE will commit individually to offering sufficient honors sections or in-course honors options in which honors program students would be expected to enroll. My expectation is that they will need to do this not only to benefit the program, but especially to benefit themselves: their own majors, their own students, and their own department members. (A ‘win-win’ situation, in other words.) These offerings would provide continuity for students across semesters, and maintain and grow the students’ sense of collegiality as they progress and enter their majors. Other honors sections, in-course honors courses, major honors, and extracurricular activities hosted by the honors coordinator would complement this core.

Honors core courses would need to be most regularly offered in Common Contexts courses (Life and Literature of the Old Testament, Life and Literature of the New Testament, Introduction to Christian Doctrine, Philosophical Reflections on Truth and Value, World History in Christian Perspective). The History, Philosophy, and Religious Studies departments have already agreed to support this plan for trial purposes. *Now we need similar support from a sufficient number of departments offering GE courses in the Common Inquiries areas.*

For the honors program to work, we will need to guarantee that enough core courses and courses across the GE curriculum include either in-course honors options or sufficiently frequent honors sections that honors students can reasonably expect to be able to enroll in them. In 2008 we had around 100 returning and 50 entering Monroe and Presidential scholars, among whom we would expect to find most or all of our honors program population.

Implementation steps. To realize this plan, I envision the following further steps:

- Solicit support and suggestions from department heads and their departments, especially in departments teaching GE courses.
- Encourage faculty and departments to experiment with in-course honors options and honors courses in the 2009-2010 academic year.
- Hold a faculty forum and a special three-day Mayterm workshop in 2009 for faculty focused on conceiving and developing honors curricula, if possible offering a stipend for participating Mayterm faculty.
- Encourage incoming Presidential scholars to take honors courses intentionally as a pilot group.
- In 2009-2010, have honors faculty meet occasionally to reassess progress with a view toward another experimental (and growing) year, rolling out a formal program, or ending the project.

The Mayterm workshop could feature the following aspects:

- Orientation to the honors program vision.
- Education on what distinguishes both honors sections and in-course honors from regular standing.
- Examples of in-course honors in several different departments and courses from faculty who have offered them, and perhaps students who have taken them.
- Honors as part of a student’s GE and major.

- Brainstorming and a syllabus workshop on teaching honors sections or in-course honors.
- A guided tour of the major honors experience from two or more faculty advisors.

The goal would be for faculty to finish the three days with their syllabi prepared for in-course honors or for distinct honors and regular sections. A stipend along the lines of recent one-week Mayterm faculty development stipends would be a significant means of compensating them for the added work of incorporating honors into their course teaching.