

the

Honors

CHALLENGE

by Denise Owen
HARRIGAN

SU'S RIGOROUS HONORS PROGRAM SETS THE PACE FOR MOTIVATED STUDENTS AND OFTEN SERVES AS A MODEL FOR NEW INITIATIVES ON CAMPUS

High school salutatorian Lori Standley '98 faced a dilemma when she looked for a college. Her intense interest in geography suggested that a large research university would be a good fit. Yet the intimacy of a small liberal arts college was also appealing. Standley found the best of both worlds in the Honors Program at Syracuse University. "SU is a big school, and I knew it would be a little intimidating," she says. "The Honors Program seemed to guarantee I would get to know my professors."

By merging the best features of a small liberal arts college and a large research university, SU's Honors Program attracts some of the country's top students. This fall's entering class included nine high school valedictorians and seven salutatorians. Twenty-two percent of this elite group—36 students—ranked among the top five in their senior classes. Many were accustomed to the fast pace, extra attention, and intellectual stimulation of high school honors programs—and expected more of the same in college.

Typical of the high-octane students attracted to the Honors Program is Jessica White '01, who plans to major in broadcast journalism and public policy studies. When she entered SU, her transcript was already

feathered with 23 college credits she'd earned in high school through SU's Project Advance, a University initiative that allows qualified high school students to take first-year courses. After her first year on campus, her GPA was 3.92.

The highly committed students in her honors classes made White feel right at home. "Honors students seem more interested in what they're learning," she says. "That makes a big difference to me. I don't like to be the only student asking and answering questions."

The Honors Program was established in the 1960s in The College of Arts and Sciences, went University-wide in 1986, and has tripled its enrollment in the past 10 years. It has two distinct components: General University Honors, which currently enrolls about 600 students, primarily first- and second-year students, and Thesis Project, with about 250 juniors and seniors. The first two years expand the breadth of the educational experience, while the final two years emphasize depth.

The two levels operate independently of each other, but both require strong academic credentials. This fall, 162 first-year students with average SATs of 1364 and class rankings in the top 6 percent entered

General University Honors by invitation. Another 100 students will be admitted second semester, after applying for admission and earning a minimum GPA of 3.5 in their first round of college courses. This midyear window accommodates students who perform better than expected in college. "The best predictor of how you will perform in college is not your SAT score, but how you actually perform in college," explains D. Bruce Carter, Honors Program director.

The first myth about the Honors Program is that it only benefits academic superstars. In fact, students who enroll in the Honors Program spend most of their time in regular classes, stimulating other students—and faculty. "Honors students can be pretty demanding. They always want more information," says Carter. "They're very, very verbal, and they routinely raise the level of discussion a couple of notches."

Ron Cavanagh, vice president for undergraduate studies, cites the Honors Program for spawning numerous innovations across campus. "It has been a laboratory for new curriculums and new pedagogies," he says. "Syracuse University's quest to provide smaller, more rigorous classes and more intensive advising for all students is

modeled after the honors approach. The freshman seminars in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and The College of Arts and Sciences are also inspired by freshman seminars in the Honors Program. Integrating research into the undergraduate experience originated in the Honors Program, as did blending boundaries between our liberal arts and professional schools. The Honors Program is where the concept of double majors first took root. Honors students have helped SU evolve into a leading student-centered research university."

Robert McClure, senior associate dean in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and a former director of the program, credits it with helping to reshape the culture and emphasis at SU. "It has provided the University with a model for the kind of service and attention all students deserve. We need to celebrate it, protect it, expand it. Unfortunately we have only so many people, so much time, and so much money. Where do you best place these resources?" wonders McClure, who serves on a campus committee exploring this critical issue.

Another myth: All Honors Program students are brilliant. In reality, their success is more often about perseverance than brilliance. "You won't find a lot of *Good Will Hunting* types in this or any other honors program," Carter says, referring to the popular movie. "The *Good Will Hunting* genius is mythological. It's not impossible, but it's rare."

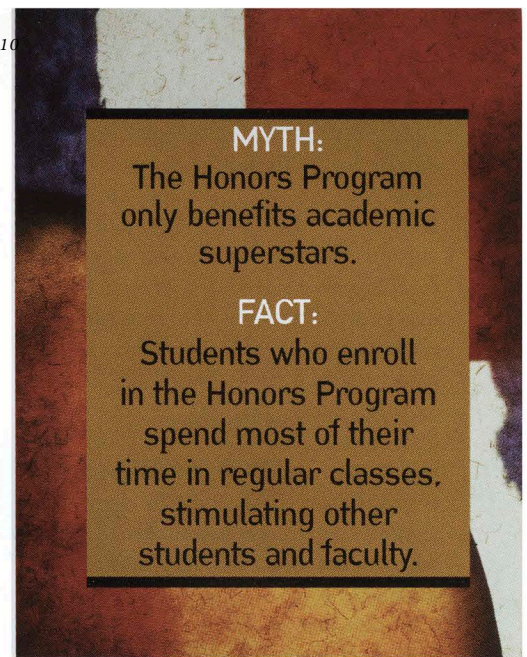
Professor Robert Gates, chair of the English department, has taught the same courses to honors and non-honors students. He's convinced that one group is no more intelligent than the other. "It's a question of commitment," Gates says. "Honors students are always in class and always prepared. They set very high standards for themselves."

Their extra effort is reflected in the Honors Program attrition rate of 4 percent; campus-wide, attrition is 10 percent. Another deterrent to dropping out is the kid-glove care that honors students receive. Their initial honors experience, a first-year seminar, is more nurturing than intellectually challenging. "It helps students get acclimated intellectually, socially, and emotionally to the academy," Carter explains. "It provides them with a peer group, a sense of belonging, and an overview of how the University operates."

School of Management Professor John Collins emphasizes the University's belief that retention and the feeling of belonging to a group are closely connected. "The freshman seminar serves this purpose very well. Faculty members interact one-on-one with freshmen in a way we don't ordinarily get to do. Since the freshmen share a journal of their experiences with us, the seminar serves as an early warning system for students in distress," Collins says. "I remember a student from Florida who arrived on campus one very cold fall. She made it clear in my seminar that she didn't like it and wasn't going to stay. I alerted a counselor in the Honors Program, and we saved her. She ended up graduating."

The heart of the Honors Program is a suite of offices, lounges, and conference rooms in Bowne Hall. Students receive some academic advice there, but it's unofficially regarded as "a safe haven," according to Kim Bart '98, who earned a dual degree in public relations and women's studies from the Newhouse School and The College of Arts and Sciences. "It's a good place to sit around, read, eat popcorn, and talk," she says. "It's a place where people know your name."

One person who knows their names is Honors Pro-



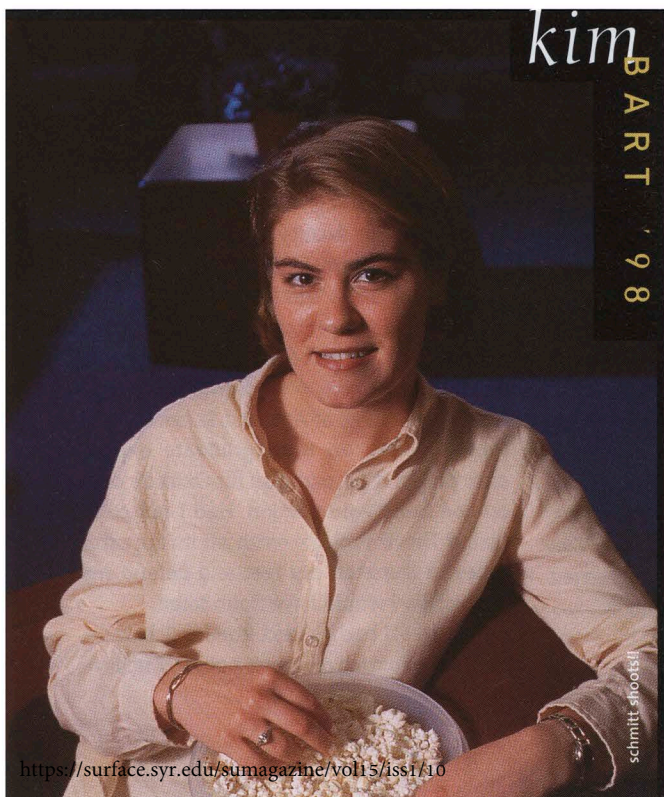
gram academic advisor Carol Erwin. "These are kids who want to do it all," she says. "We function as their sounding board. We slow them down and let them hear themselves speak."

David Coryell, the program's student services coordinator, enjoys the personal atmosphere and interaction with the students. "I've started a softball team with these kids, met them for dinner, helped them move, and hired them to baby-sit," he says.

The program's serious academic work begins after freshman seminar. Freshmen and sophomores in General University Honors take four rigorous honors courses plus two one-credit sophomore seminars. "Sophomore seminars expand the students' horizons beyond campus," explains Judy Hamilton, associate director of the Honors Program. "Some seminars look at the different ethnic communities within the Syracuse area. Others help students understand the cultural and civic infrastructure of Syracuse—or any community."

Lori Standley, who graduated from The College of Arts and Sciences with an honors degree in geography, took the sophomore seminar on the local Hispanic community and spent one afternoon a week working with inner-city Hispanic teens. "I had wanted to do something like that, but I was very into academics and had a part-time job," Standley says. "This seminar made it more of a priority."

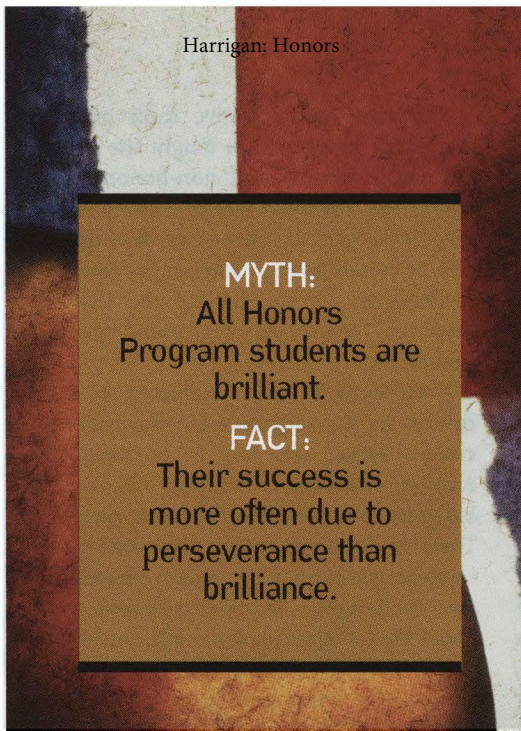
Because community service can be a powerful learning tool, it has been applied to sophomore seminars for some time. Last year, honors students completed a 20-hour placement and "provided tremendous re-



sources to the community," according to Pam Heintz, director of the Center for Public and Community Service. However, the goal is to help the students learn about themselves. "They are accustomed to problem solving very successfully. In this course, they had to adjust their intensity and high level of expectations. They learned that being smart doesn't mean you have all the answers. Some problems are very complex and need to be managed, not solved. For many of these students, this was the first time they bumped up against something they couldn't fix by being smart," she says. "All the students learned to be more empathetic, and put a human face on social issues. This is important, since students of this caliber are likely to affect social policy one day."

With or without a nudge from a community service seminar, Carter characterizes many of the students as being altruistic and socially committed. "Community service seems to go hand-in-hand with better students," he says.

Right out of the gate, Jessica White '01 joined several campus organizations, including Undergraduates for a Better Education (UBE). In her first year, she led a cam-



paign to add a citizenship clause to the University's mission and vision statements. "There's a big movement on campus to teach and practice good citizenship," she says. "I hope to help make it a more formal commitment."

White's effort dispels another myth: Honors students are eggheads, immersed only in academic pursuits. "Their hearts are as big as their brains," insists Coryell, who organized a breakfast club last year at a local middle school. Once a week, about 20 honors students started the day by showering attention on at-risk sixth-graders.

Jordan Potash '98 could be a poster child for altruistic honors students. Potash, who graduated with a dual degree in art and psychology, produced an innovative honors thesis on art therapy as a tool for helping gays, lesbians, and bisexuals with coming-out issues. Despite sometimes staggering pressure related to his thesis, Potash worked as a resident advisor on campus and as a volunteer at Hutchings Psychiatric Center. He was also active in student affairs and interreligious efforts. "Anything involving social action and challenging people's beliefs, I was part of it," Potash says. "I've always been very concerned about diversity. Everyone knows you don't tell certain kinds of jokes around me."

In the junior year, the Honors Program narrows its focus. Drastically. Thesis Project, the second—and completely separate—phase of the program, requires students to explore in-depth a topic in their major. Thesis Project requires an application for admission, a minimum GPA of 3.5, and an extraordinary level of commitment. Completion of General University Honors is not a prerequisite. "Thesis Project is not for every student," warns Judy Hamilton, associate director of the Honors Program. "It's a huge commitment, and it involves a lot of blood, sweat, and tears."

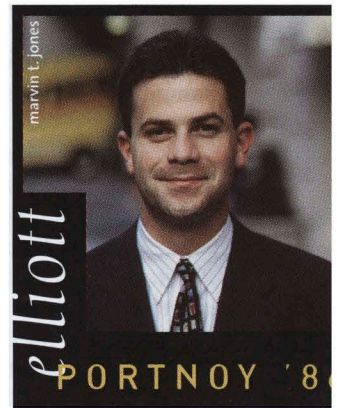
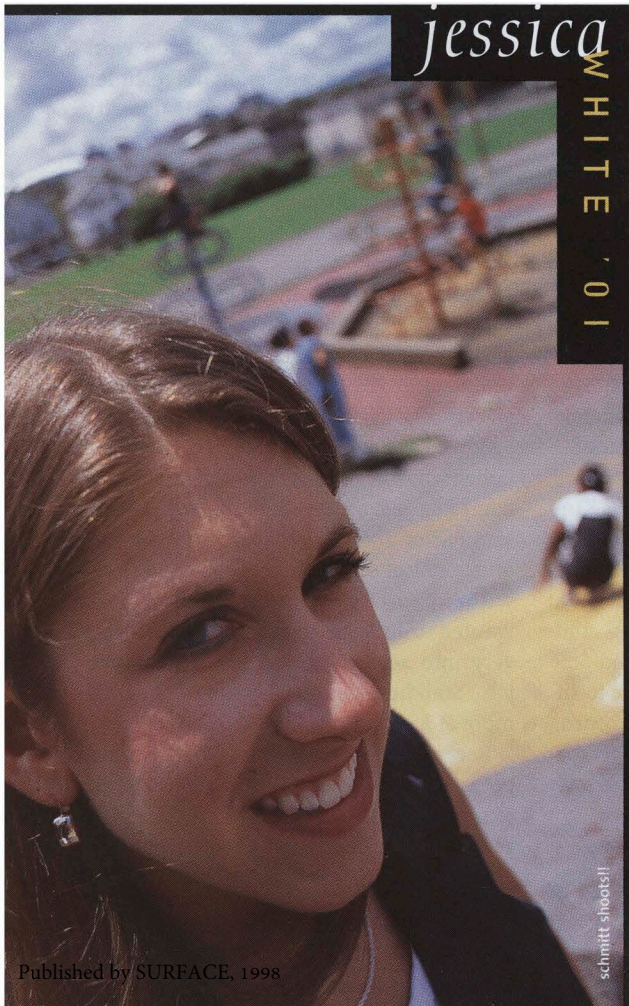
SU's 50 percent completion rate for Thesis Project is at the high end for universities nationwide; many report a completion rate of only 5 to 10 percent. Boosting SU's success rate is a Thesis Project planning seminar that gives juniors a detailed road map—and fair warning—of the process ahead. While many universities have honors programs, only SU offers such a seminar.

"The Thesis Project is modeled after graduate work," explains School of Management

Professor Sandra Hurd, associate to the director for Thesis Project Honors. "It is very autonomous and in-depth. One of its real advantages is the experience of working one-on-one with a faculty member. Three semesters of sitting down and having intellectual conversations with a faculty member can have a magical effect."

This intense faculty interaction proved pivotal for Elliott Portnoy '86, SU's first Rhodes Scholar. "It was identical to the tutorial system I encountered later while earning my Ph.D. at Oxford," says Portnoy, who received a political science honors degree from The College of Arts and Sciences. "The typical American undergraduate experience does not prepare you for Oxford's one-on-one faculty interaction. Had I not completed Thesis Project—with all its opportunities to think on my feet and defend my positions—I would have floundered."

"When SU has its next Rhodes Scholar—and it's a matter of when, not if—I believe



that student will come out of the Honors Program,” says Portnoy, who earned a law degree at Harvard University and is a senior associate attorney with Arent, Fox, Kintner, Plotkin, and Kahn, one of Washington, D.C.’s largest law firms.

Although career skills accrue from Thesis Project, the experience is not marketed as a career-building strategy. “To make it through the rigors of Thesis Project, you must have a passion for your subject, a burning question you need to answer,” Hamilton says.

Hurd, however, believes that if the project were strictly an intellectual experience, the program would be much smaller. “Students are more pragmatic than they used to be,” she says. “They ask, ‘What’s it going to do for me?’ I tell them it can be an intellectual exercise, a personal journey, or a step toward a professional goal.”

Sometimes it’s all three. For his Thesis Project, educational video producer Lee Larcheveque ’95, G’97, made a 22-minute film about monarch butterflies. He did all the research, writing, videography, and editing. He composed and recorded the keyboard music for the soundtrack. The final project swept all the awards that year: the David Orlin Prize for Best Thesis Project, the Fuji Film Award for Best Newhouse Thesis, and SU’s National Academy of TV Arts and Sciences Award. The following year, in Hollywood, the film won the equivalent of a college Emmy from the Academy of TV Arts and Sciences. It’s currently being distributed by the University of Kansas as part of the elementary school curriculum Monarch Watch.

“It’s good to know the video has had a shelf life,” says The College of Arts and Sciences and Newhouse School graduate. “But I wasn’t thinking professionally when I took on the project. It was very personal. I had been raising butterflies since I was in second grade, and I had always wanted to do a documentary start to finish,” he says. “The project took about 40 hours per week at certain points and a total of 1,000 hours, maybe more. With a project of this size, you’re never really done. While I was earning my master’s degree at Newhouse, I

take courses in one discipline to understand concepts in another,” The College of Arts and Sciences graduate explains. “For example, I took a psychology course to help sort out the conflict in Northern Ireland.”

Her ability to approach problems from fresh perspectives has already served Bonner well. Despite a stellar academic career, she found herself faltering when a promised job offer fell through before graduation. “I went to Washington, D.C., with \$17 and my honors advisor’s phone number in my Rolodex. She helped me find an SU family to live with and a job as a receptionist on Capitol Hill. She also helped me weigh that position’s potential against a job offer for twice the salary,” says Bonner, who quickly advanced from receptionist to deputy press secretary for Congresswoman Patty Murray, then to her current post as press secretary for the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

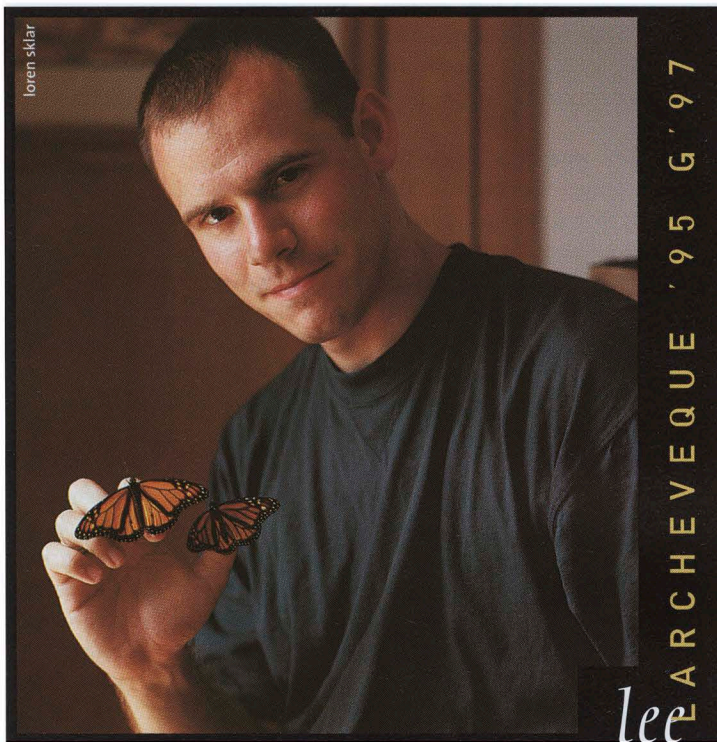
Charlene Wilson ’95, who earned a dual

degree in economics and finance from The College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Management, realizes her thesis was “really out there, in terms of what you’d expect from an undergraduate.” Using data collected by the University, Wilson developed a system that helped predict which students are most likely to choose SU.

In Wilson’s three years of working with housing data for the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C.—and even while she was earning a master’s degree in statistics at George Washington University—she has yet to tackle a project as sophisticated as her honors thesis. “I agonized over that thesis,” Wilson remembers. “Many times I said to myself, ‘I’m not going to do this anymore.’ But I started it, so I needed to finish it.”

Most honors students consider the insights gained in the Honors Program indispensable to their careers—and their lives. What Rebekka Bonner ’95 values most is the program’s interdisciplinary approach, which “helps you think outside the box.”

“My honors advisors encouraged me to



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