UF Honors Celebrates the Freedom to Read

Banned Books Week, sponsored annually for the last 30 years by the American Library Association, took place September 30—October 6, 2012. In recognition of this event, the Honors Program sponsored several activities. The Honors common reader was Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*; we chose this book to stimulate discussion about its recent removal from library shelves in a Missouri school district. On October 4, we welcomed Dr. Marc Leeds, president of the Kurt Vonnegut Society and board member of the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library, to speak to the university community about the library’s ingenious response to this action—any student who wanted a copy of the book could receive one free of charge from the Library.

Honors students were invited to submit essays in response to the following prompt: In 2011, a Missouri school district removed Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* from library shelves after receiving one parent complaint. Given that many Americans have access to materials online, including full texts of thousands of books, do such actions matter? Why or why not? Also, given the ubiquity of potentially offensive language and imagery in popular culture, can such actions even make a difference? Why or why not? After carefully reading over 50 entries, judges Dr. Kevin Knudson and Dr. Eric Kligerman awarded senior Lombardi Scholar Hillary Wehry the top prize in the competition.
A Note from the Director

There has been a lot of talk lately about Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Critics worry that MOOCs will be used to justify further cuts to higher education funding and will transform most faculty into glorified teaching assistants. Recently, the philosophy faculty at San Jose State University published an open letter to Michael Sandel, a Harvard professor whose Justice MOOC was being pushed upon them by the SJSU administration. The letter is interesting and makes some valid points, many of which I agree with, but as I read it something bothered me: these professors rejected something without even trying it. I suppose you could say that they should just stand on principle, but I think they are missing a chance to engage in an educational experiment. They may very well be right that Prof. Sandel’s MOOC isn’t right for their students, but how do they know? I propose the following: Mad MOOC: Beyond Thunderdome.

Two courses enter; one course leaves. Have half the SJSU students take the MOOC and put the other half into the local course. Perform the same assessments. Get some data. Then decide what the right course of action is.

I haven’t made up my mind about MOOCs yet. I see the potential to use them in interesting, blended ways that could enhance the traditional classroom experience. I also share my colleagues’ concerns about how MOOCs could be misused by politicians looking for cost-saving measures. I thought I’d investigate myself and try to get some current UF Honors students to join me. Here’s the email I sent them:

In the spirit of intellectual inquiry, I have enrolled in a MOOC this summer and I am writing to invite you to join me. The course is taught by Professor Robert Ghrist, a mathematician at the University of Pennsylvania. The course is called Calculus: Single Variable and you may sign up at coursera: https://www.coursera.org/course/calcsing. Now, to be fair I’m cheating a bit—after all, I am a professor of mathematics myself so the workload won’t be too demanding for me. However, I know Prof. Ghrist, and I can assure you that he gives the best lectures I have ever seen. He is very engaging and funny. Check out the preview video for the course and you’ll get a feel for his style.

In conjunction with this course, I have created an e-Learning site where we can interact and discuss this on two levels: the actual mathematics involved, and the meta-analysis of the MOOC experience. If you would like to join me in this adventure, you should do the following:

1. Sign up for the course at https://www.coursera.org/course/calcsing. It is free.
2. Send me an email with your gatorlink and I will add you to the e-Learning site.

The course begins May 24, 2013 and runs all summer. Dr. Ghrist assumes that you have seen calculus before (e.g. Calculus AB in high school) and can do basic things. You will gain a much deeper conceptual understanding of calculus if you work at this course.

About 30 intrepid souls volunteered to join me. I will write about the experience on my blog (http://kpknudson.com/blog/), so feel free to check in occasionally to see how it’s going. I’ve been teaching calculus for more than 20 years, but I still anticipate that I will learn something. Calculus for the fun of it? You bet.

Have a good summer. We’ll see you in the fall.

Dr. Kevin Knudson, Director
BUILDING ROCKETS
and Setting World Records

SpaceX has quickly become one of the most popular private launch providers in the world since it was formed in 2002. They will soon be the cheapest provider for putting satellites and people into orbit. I was lucky to have the opportunity to work for them in Hawthorne, CA for a semester. I was able to feel energy and excitement coming from the employees every day as they work towards making humans an interplanetary species.

The experience taught me much more about electronics, space systems, hard work, leadership, and start-up companies than I could have possibly learned from any combination of classes. Unlike at other aerospace companies, interns at SpaceX are given real problems and tasks that are important to the success of launch missions. This also means interns are given huge responsibility and an endless stream of challenges with no textbook solutions.

Working in Avionics Integration helped me figure out exactly what kinds of classes and extracurricular activities I want to focus on throughout the rest of my education. It also allowed me to meet, work with, and befriend some of the best Electrical Engineers and Physicists in the country. Anyone who is studying engineering or natural science and is interested in being part of the future of human exploration should consider applying for SpaceX. (by Matt Feldman)

As if this weren’t enough, Matt set a world record over the summer while working at Rice University in Houston. You may have never heard of “joggling” but Matt is one of the best in the world. Matt ran a mile in 6 minutes, 33.645 seconds at the Rice track while juggling five balls, besting the previous record set more than 20 years ago. Matt is using the publicity to help aid victims of the 2011 Japanese tsunami; for more information, visit his website: http://ianelsner.com/Tohoku1600/index.html.
On Sunday, December 2, the Honors Program hosted a holiday party for students at the UF President’s House. Dressed in cocktail attire, students enjoyed a light buffet and the company of their peers in the elegantly decorated home. There was one catch: to be granted entry, students were required to contribute at least two non-perishable food items to be donated to the Bread of the Mighty food bank. Naturally, our students went above and beyond, and we collected 632 pounds of food during the evening.
It’s Great to Be an
HONORS GATOR

by Liz McNeill

May 14, 2013

As I reflect on my four years at the University of Florida, I can say with certainty that the Honors Program has made complete – if not simply made – my college experience. The program’s community atmosphere quickly pulled me in as a student leader and continues to fuel my deep connection to the university as a proud alumnus. It’s truly great to be an Honors Gator.

Upon arriving at UF, I was insecure and believed that I couldn't stand out amongst 35,000 undergraduates. But the tight-knit community of the Honors Program welcomed and accepted me and, in so doing, nurtured my confidence. My peers became my lifelong friends, older students mentored me, advisors took a personal interest in my life, and professors encouraged the potential that I couldn’t yet see in myself. For these people and so many more, I’m forever grateful.

My experience is not uncommon. Indeed, the Honors Program is not simply a group of accomplished students and a slew of unattainable opportunities for the few; all honors students take part in this shared pursuit of personal excellence. With the support of the honors community, students make friends, conduct research, serve others, find adventure, host events, study abroad, give tours, earn scholarships, share their passions, and ultimately challenge themselves. The Honors Program’s goal is not just to inspire students’ academic gifts but to inspire students to capture every opportunity and, as Thoreau said, to “suck out all the marrow of life.”

Initially, my experience in the Honors Program was tacked upon my university tee shirt and tacked upon my university résumé; but now, after four years, my experience in the Honors Program is tacked upon my personal character. I now understand that success is more about who you’ve become than what you’ve done. The Honors Program has given me a devotion to my community, a sense of patient resilience in the face of trials, and a desire to motivate and teach others. Furthermore, I now understand that I can only fulfill my potential when I relentlessly pursue my passions and am not afraid to ask for help. Joseph Campbell famously said, “Follow your bliss and don’t be afraid, and doors will open where you didn’t know they were going to be.” While we may find these doors by ourselves, we often need others to point us to these doors. Time and again, my honors peers and advisors have identified opportunities as I’ve pieced together the puzzle of my life. Undoubtedly, the honors community supports its members who boldly seek their passions.

Whether you’re an incoming freshman or a rising senior, I encourage you to get involved with the Honors Program in some way. Take an honors class with one of our amazing professors. Speak to one of our fantastic advisors. Wear some “honors swag.” Attend the many events that our student organizations host. Befriend your fellow students and create your own niche of the honors community. Now matter what you do, there’s an opportunity for you to become the Honors Gator you’re meant to be.
This fall, the Honors Ambassadors established what we hope will become a new tradition within the Honors Program. Upholding our mission to help Honors students find meaningful involvement at the University, we hosted “Make your Mark: The Honors Involvement Conference.” Our vision for this event was to help students discover organizations and opportunities in which they could pursue their interests, make an impact on UF’s campus, and in doing so enhance their own college experiences. Nearly 150 Honors students attended the conference, which was held in the J. Wayne Reitz Union on September 23, 2012.

Organized by Honors Ambassadors Carleigh Bruce, Vivan Nguyen, and Lauren Silliman, “Make your Mark” invited resources from across campus to showcase the different aspects of student involvement at UF. Our sister Honors organizations, including the Student Honors Organization (SHO), Honors without Borders, H-Camp, and Prism magazine tabled in the morning and informed our attendees of ways to get involved within the Honors community.

Our Ambassadors also collaborated with the Honors advisors and representatives from the Career Resource Center, International Center, Office of Pre-Health and Legal Professions Advising, Center for Leadership and Service, and Office of Undergraduate Research to create informative and personalized presentations. Together, we offered insight and advice on topics such as obtaining internships, studying abroad, pursuing a career in the health professions, participating in community service, procuring research positions, developing leadership skills, and applying for prestigious scholarships.

Students were able to attend two presentations, which they selected based on their own specific interests and experiences. During a break between sessions, we participated in a thirty-minute Zumba class, led by a certified Zumba instructor and UF student. We incorporated this activity in order to highlight that staying active in college is just as vital to a balanced college experience as extracurricular involvement. It was exciting to see that students who were initially hesitant about this activity were enthusiastically participating by the end of the class.

After the conference, students and Ambassadors walked together to Hume Hall for lunch with SHO and Dr. David Barber, the faculty-in-residence at Hume. Dr. Barber and Honors Program director Dr. Kevin Knudson graciously grilled hamburgers and veggie burgers, while students and faculty mingled on the beautiful lawn behind Hume Commons.

Overall, “Make your Mark” celebrated the achievements that Honors students have already made at UF as well as the passion of our new Honors students to ignite their own path at the university. We enjoyed the opportunity to connect with our fellow Honors students, and we look forward to seeing how this event grows next year.
In 2013, the Honors Program initiated the Honors Investigation Team (HIT) program. The pilot course this spring was called “Fostering Sustainable Behavior: Local Food Systems. Students in the course explored social scientific models of fostering sustainable behavior change both in the local community and in their own relationship to food. The course employed community-based service learning to provide students with the opportunity to learn through practice, and gain knowledge through experience.

Students spent the first part of the semester exploring the community, and learning from people already working in local food systems. They visited the cooperative grocery, local organic gardens, and an incubator kitchen for local food entrepreneurs. Students interviewed people in the Porters Community in downtown Gainesville and the Greek Sorority houses on campus. The class split into two groups, one working to introduce healthy food habits in the afterschool program at the Porter’s Community Center, and the other initiating a campaign for composting in UF’s sorority kitchens.

Students were challenged to work as a team, to take initiative and exercise leadership, and to be responsive to concerns and ideas of local community representatives. While the course was labeled “High Impact Teaching,” it quickly became clear that what was really going on was “High Impact Learning.” Students were learning from each other, from the Gainesville and campus community, and from their direct experiences.

One student from the class said, “Working in a community to make change is a really important experience for students to have because that’s exactly what we’ll be doing in the real world.” Another student said, “This class has been great because it really required all the students to get to know each other and learn to work together. We had to respect one another to accomplish something. Most other classes force students to compete against each other for a better grade or class ranking. This class helped us identify our own and each others’ strengths and weaknesses. By doing so we created the best possible project.” A third student said, “My favorite thing about this class was that it was the first class in my whole UF career where I didn’t dread doing group work, and the whole semester was based on group projects! Group work was presented in a whole new way.”

In their community-based projects, students experienced both the frustrations of real-world challenges and the benefits of building personal relationships on and off campus. They also had tangible successes, with multiple articles published in the Alligator about their efforts, an improved local food network between campus and the Gainesville community, and concrete initiatives taken to make UF’s sororities more sustainable.

“This class was different because it allowed us to learn from each other and from real life experiences instead of just reading textbooks and hearing lectures. It allowed me to nurture relationships with my professors as well as fellow classmates, in a more in-depth and personal way.”
KUDOS

We have some pretty impressive students and faculty and we like to tout their achievements. Here are some of the awards and honors our folks garnered this year.

Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship
Joshua Achiam – honorable mention
Rachel Damiani – honorable mention
Anthony Quartararo – honorable mention

Udall Scholarship
Samantha Baraoidan – honorable mention

John V. Lombardi Scholars
Sean Patrick Bliven
Alexis Cunio
Juan Ehringer
Nishtha Garg
Nicholas Johnson
Alexander Sargent
Ciara Styles
Alexander Touchton

Stamps Family Charitable Foundation Scholars
Robert King
Ethan Landrum
Christina Wiley

Elizabeth Wood Dunlevie Honors Term Professors 2013-14
Susan Gillespie, Anthropology
Panos Pardalos, Industrial and Systems Engineering
Jack Putz, Biology
Lou Ritz, Neuroscience

Honors Professors of the Year 2012-13
Connie Mulligan, Anthropology
Roberta Knickerbocker, Academic Advising Center
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