

TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION OF THE PRESIDENTIAL HONORS PROGRAM

April 9, 2005

Remarks by Dr. Craig Clifford, Director, Presidential Honors Program

WHEN RHETT GUTHRIE, who entered the program in 1990, e-mailed me that he would come to the dinner last night at our house but not to the events today because they sounded too “stuffy,” I was reminded of the 50th anniversary celebration of Plan II, the honors program I was in at the University of Texas. John Silber, who had taught the Plan II sophomore philosophy course in which I decided to study philosophy, gave the keynote address. He started by saying that all of us, as former Plan II honors students, had studied Immanuel Kant’s philosophy so that we would be able to follow a scholarly lecture on Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, which he proceeded to deliver without a pause or even a hint of comic relief for a solid hour and a half. OK, don’t worry, even though some would say I’ve modeled my teaching on John Silber, I won’t do that to you!

In fact, in the interest of keeping this event from being stuffy, I’ll fulfill a promise I made to another graduate who didn’t come today. I promised David Bixler, who entered the program in 1988, I’d show this picture if he wasn’t here—more accurately, I guess you’d say I threatened to show it. This is what David looked like back then [*see Figure 1*]. David, as many of you know, went on to complete a Ph.D. in physics at Rice, and now teaches at Angelo State, and I believe has been involved in starting an honors program there, which, in spite of David’s efforts, I am confident can’t hold a candle to ours.

NOW THAT we’ve set the tone, I’d like to recognize a few people. I won’t mention everyone, but I do want to mention a few:

Betti Cryer, the Honors secretary, who did most of the work in planning this event—and who did all of this [*pointing to display boards*]

Dr. Peer and Dr. McCabe—for putting up with me, and for paying for lunch

Dr. Karen Murray—for working closely with me for the last couple of years (and Dr. Peer probably wants



Figure 1

to thank her, too, for shielding him from me)

Dr. Mallory Young and **Dr. Pat Zelman**—former directors

I'd also like to recognize collectively the following: members of the Honors Programs Advisory Committee, deans and department heads who've worked with us to offer honors courses, and the faculty members who teach them.

THE THREE STAGES

OF COURSE any division of a dynamic historical entity into distinct periods is somewhat artificial, but I think it makes some sense to see the development of the Presidential Honors Program over its 20-year history in terms of three stages or eras. And later this morning we'll hear from several of the graduates whose experience spans that 20-year history.

Stage 1

IN THE FALL OF 1985 fifteen students entered the Presidential Honors Program. They each received a scholarship of \$2,500 a year. Two of those students, Laurie (Harveson) Barker and Scott Walker, are here today, and Scott will speak later today. To show you how long ago that was, here's a picture of me from 1985 [*see Figure 2*] . . . and here's a picture of Dr. Young from 1985 [*See Figure 3*].



Figure 2



Figure 3

The first Honors Seminar was taught in the fall of 1985 by Tom Pilkington, Mark Davis, and Chris Guthrie. The topic was "Symbol in Popular Culture," and I'm still waiting for someone from that class to explain to me what in the world that course was about. To show you how long

ago that was, here are pictures of Dr. Guthrie and Dr. Pilkington taken at that time [see Figures 4 and 5].



Figure 4

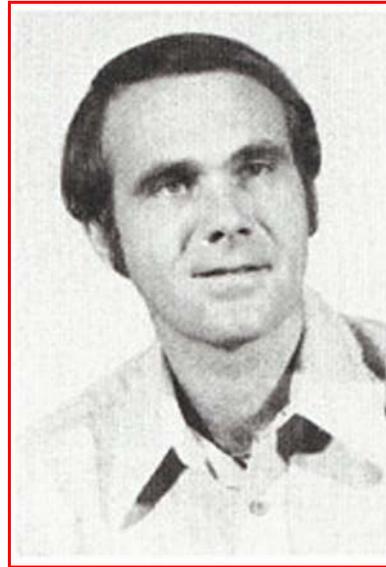


Figure 5

One of the common threads that ties the 20 years together is the Honors Seminar. I've noticed that whenever people talk about their experiences in the program they almost always say something about the Honors Seminars they took. Monty Ray, who entered the program in 1989, recently sent me some remarks about his experiences that he wanted me to relay to you since he was not able to attend. One of the things he said was: "Among the most stimulating classes I took were . . . the annual Honors Seminars I took on the French revolution and the History of Science." Wayne Keith talks about taking a seminar on "Philosophy, Sophistry, and Democracy" his first year (the teacher of which shall remain nameless) and Chris Guthrie's "The Horror Genre in Literature, Film, and Television" his sophomore year. Take a look at Wayne's comments during the break.

And Amber Dawson, soon to be Dr. Dawson, will probably deny this, but when she saw her *A* posted on my door for the Honors Seminar she took from me, she said, and I quote, "This is the greatest accomplishment of my life!" Since that time she's had a number of considerably greater accomplishments, and, OK, that was a bit of hyperbole even when she said it, but I'm proud that I was able to challenge her enough to get that remark.

I urge you to take a look at the list of titles and instructors for the 20 years of Honors Seminars during the break [see *Text Box 1*].

TWENTY YEARS OF HONORS SEMINARS

| | | |
|-------------|---|---|
| Spring 2005 | Dr. Jeremy Curtoys | "Environmental Conundrums" |
| Spring 2004 | Dr. Craig Clifford | "The Concept of a Liberal Education" |
| Spring 2003 | Dr. Charles Howard | "Media Literacy" |
| Spring 2002 | Dr. Craig Clifford | "The Concept of a Liberal Education" |
| Spring 2001 | Dr. Teresa Davidian | "Music and Society" |
| Spring 2000 | Dr. Craig Clifford | "The Concept of a Liberal Education" |
| Spring 1999 | Dr. Greg Paine | "History of Mathematics: Selected Topics" |
| | Dr. Javier Garza, Dr. Karl Havlak Dr. Peter White | |
| Spring 1998 | Dr. Craig Clifford | "The End of Education" |
| Spring 1997 | Dr. Art Low | "The Portrayal of Science in Science Fiction" |
| Spring 1996 | Dr. Craig Clifford | "Issues in Higher Education" |
| Spring 1995 | Dr. Marcia Schober | "Equality: Gender and the Law" |
| Spring 1994 | Dr. Charles Rives | "A Philosophy of Art" (or "The 'Why' of Music") |
| Spring 1993 | Dr. Chris Guthrie | The Horror Genre in Literature, Film, and Television" |
| Spring 1992 | Dr. Craig Clifford | "Philosophy, Sophistry, and Democracy" |
| Spring 1991 | Dr. Rueben Walter | "The Development of Scientific Thought" |
| | Dr. Phillip Murray | |
| Spring 1990 | Dr. Chris Guthrie | "The French Revolution" |
| Spring 1989 | Dr. Jeremy Curtoys | "Political Leadership" |
| Spring 1988 | Dr. Robert Newby | "Issues in Education" |
| Spring 1987 | Dr. Dwayne Snider | "Issues in Public Health Policy" |
| Fall 1985 | Dr. Tom Pilkington | "Symbol in Popular Culture" |
| | Dr. Chris Guthrie Mr. Mark Davis | |

Text Box 1

Stage 2

INITIALLY, PHP was primarily a scholarship program with a very important, but small academic component, the Honors Seminar. But in 1990 Dr. Mallory Young taught the first Honors section of a core course, English 1123, to 21 students. Noble Acuff, who'll speak to you later today, was in that course. Also, Amy (Neeb) Norman. The second stage, starting with that course, involved the development of a full-fledged academic Honors program. Although it causes some confusion, a second program was launched, the Honors Degree Program, which offers honors sections of core courses. Presidential Honors Scholars participate in these courses, as well as other qualified students. Gradually over the years, we've added more and more of the core to these offerings. In the early days, we sometimes had to squint when we looked at the GPAs of some of the students taking the courses; otherwise, some of those courses wouldn't have made. But gradually the interest picked up, and currently honors core courses are offered in almost all core areas. That includes four new courses which will be offered for the first time next year. In the fall we will offer two sections of Communications 101, two sections of English 112, History 201, Political Science 201, Geology 105, Biology 120, Physics 122, Economics 201, and Math

120. In the spring we will offer honors sections of Chemistry 108, English 250, History 202, Political Science 202, Psychology 101, and Sociology 201.

Since the beginning of the Honors Degree Program in 1990, over 1500 students have taken Honors classes. Back at the beginning of what I'm calling Stage 2, Presidential Honors Scholars only took a couple of these courses; now they routinely take honors sections of virtually all of the core courses they take.

Your major prepares you for your profession, but what we focus on in these honors core courses is raising the level of the general education, of what used to be called a liberal education. As many of you know from reading Jacob Klein's essay on liberal education in my seminar, the liberal arts are so named, that is, named with the Latin word for freedom, *libertas*, because they are the arts that prepare a human being to exercise freedom well, both the freedom of a citizen and the freedom of a human being pursuing the truth and wisdom.

Stage 3

FOR TEN YEARS the scholarship remained \$2,500. But in the fall of 1997 it was raised to \$3,000, thanks to Julie "I-want-more-money" Seifert and the beautiful graph she did showing the relationship of the scholarship to the cost. Beginning with that increase to \$3,000 in the fall of 1997, we have gradually raised the scholarship amount to its current \$5,500 a year, and for next year Dr. McCabe has just recently approved an increase to \$6,000 a year.

Also, for about the first 15 years of the program, we admitted about 10 students each fall, which resulted in a total of 25 to 30 students in the program. About five years ago, Dr. McCabe gave the green light, not only to gradually increase the scholarship amount, but to increase the size of the program without sacrificing the quality. Within a few short years the program grew to more than 50 students. Seventeen students averaging 1316 on the SAT were recently selected to enter the program next year, which will bring the total to 55 students. If my math is correct, that means that next year the Presidential Honors Program will provide \$330,000 in scholarships. These increased numbers have certainly changed the character of the program and made the program more of a presence on campus.

Stage 3 involves a rapid growth in the size of the program, but it also involves a number of significant additions in the way of cultural and educational enrichment. From the beginning we included funding for a conference trip, as well as trips to meetings of the National Honors Council and the Great Plains Honors Council. But I wanted to talk for a minute about some of the new developments.

Several years ago I took several students to the annual conference of the Great Plains Honors Council, which happened to be in Fort Worth that year. The keynote speaker, Dr. Punch Shaw, gave a wonderful talk about the art museums of Fort Worth. Speaking to 400 honors students from half a dozen states, he talked about the way in which the arts define a city and about the importance of finding a place in our lives for truth and beauty. At the reception afterwards, I asked him if we could hire him to give the same lecture at Tarleton. To make a long story short, that blossomed into what is now the Visiting Scholars program. Here's a description of that program from the honors website:

The Presidential Honors Visiting Scholars Program establishes a permanent relation

with distinguished individuals who come to our campus on a regular basis to give public lectures, present guest class lectures, and conduct workshops, as well as supervise off-campus events for our students These Visiting Scholars can best be described as "public intellectuals"—they have impressive academic credentials and can operate within the academic sphere, but they also interact with the general public and contribute to the public dialogue.

I invite you to look at the display on the Visiting Scholars program at the break, but I'll mention a couple of highlights. In February we brought a speaker from Italy who spent an entire week on campus giving lectures and meeting with students and faculty, Prof. Mariachiara Russo. She is a professional interpreter who works in Italian, Spanish, and English, and she now teaches at a branch campus of the University of Bologna training interpreters. In higher education these days we talk a lot about multiculturalism and the interaction of different cultures—it was fascinating to hear Prof. Russo talk about the role of interpreters as cultural mediators who have to understand, not just two languages, but two cultures in order to do what they do. Just to pick one from next year's agenda, one of the country's foremost authorities on reproductive medicine, Dr. Marcelle Cedars, will spend two days on campus in November. She's the director of the Division of Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility and the director of the Embryology Laboratory at the Center for Reproductive Health at the University of California at San Francisco. She'll give one talk about reproductive medicine and one about the value of a liberal education as preparation for professional school and professional life. OK, I'll admit it, I've taken a special interest in her because she was a philosophy major at Wellesley.

Related to the Visiting Scholars program and funded through the Presidential Honors Enrichment Society, we have added a number of cultural events. This year was the third year of our annual trip to the Fort Worth Opera at Bass Hall, and this year it included a backstage and stage tour before the performance of *Salome*. This is also the third year of our annual trip to the Kimbell and Amon Carter Art Museums in Fort Worth. We drive up on a Saturday morning, and Dr. Shaw conducts a tour of the Kimbell in the morning and the Amon Carter in the afternoon, stopping to talk about representative paintings from each of the significant parts of the museums' collections.

Another recent development: Instead of going to a conference during your senior year, you can apply that money to summer study abroad. Amanda Baulch was the first student to take advantage of this change—she went to London last summer to study Shakespeare, and I just heard her give an excellent presentation about *Hamlet* which was inspired by a production she saw there. And this summer several students will receive assistance through PHP to go to Guatemala to study Spanish. Dr. Peer, if this catches on the way I think it will, we may be in trouble.

As Dr. Thompson used to say, I go on and on and on . . .

Common Threads

I'VE TALKED mainly about the developments and transformations of the program—about the three “stages.” But in one sense it is the same program and there is a kind of core feeling to it.

What are the common threads? One I've already talked about—20 years of the Honors Seminar. But one other thread I see running through so many of the comments I've received, and I see it unfolding every day as I work with the current students. I'll let Monty Ray speak again:

My years at Tarleton were packed full of experience, just as the college years should be. Some experiences were positive and some negative, but I really must say that I will always regard the PHP as the very best aspect of my experience at Tarleton. In the early 90s there was a great sense of camaraderie between the PHP students. At the time, they were my best friends, and some of them still are today. We hung out together almost constantly, many of us living in the co-ed dorm on campus. We went camping, took road-trips, and all the while we were constantly arguing and exploring the great questions in religion, politics, science, and history.

. . . Since its inception, the PHP has made the college experience what it should be—a process of intellectual exploration and discovery.

I see the same kinds of bonds being formed now. They come from taking classes together—our version of the “block program.” They come from living together—now in Centennial and the campus apartments and off campus as well. And it comes from the spontaneous things that happen when you throw a bunch of smart, creative people together. To echo Monty's comments about camping and road-trips, I'll tell you a quick story: One of the freshmen came to me the other day with an idea. The students in the Honors Seminar on environmental issues taught by Jeremy Curtoys are reading John Graves' *Goodbye to a River*, which is about a canoe trip Graves took on the Brazos River back in the 60s. Several of the students in the Honors Seminar are planning to do a two-day canoe trip down a stretch of the Brazos in order to get a better feel for what Graves is talking about. My money says that 15 or 20 years from now, many of the students who go on that trip will still be friends, and they'll be writing to some future director of this program about the experience they had back in 2005 on the Brazos River.

WHAT IS THE VALUE of this program? Is it worth it? Yes, in so many ways, it would be impossible to talk about all of them. But a few remarks:

1. A program like this changes the character and the image of the campus. It raises the standards for everyone, teachers included. Tarleton prides itself on its accessibility, and there is no reason to change that tradition, but it also prides itself on the excellence of the education it offers. Populating classes and campus activities with students on the highest level of talent and motivation is an essential part of that equation, and I see it at work every day.
2. But since this occasion is about the students who have graduated from this program, there's another reason that is more pertinent. This is something I always talk about at the Academic Awards ceremony, but it has a special meaning today:

In a democratic society, one of the functions of a good educational institution—and

sorry, Rhett, but this will be a little bit stuffy—is to identify talented people who have something special to offer to their society, and to figure out a way to challenge them, to help them develop that talent to its fullest potential and to develop it in a way that will contribute in a significant way. In *Excellence: Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?*, a very fine book that I always use in my Honors Seminar, John Gardner says:

. . . talent in itself isn't enough. . . . we find ourselves asking "Talent in the service of what values?" Talent in the service of truth or beauty or justice is one thing; talent in the service of greed or tyranny is quite another. In other words, neither intellect nor talent alone can be the key to a position of leadership in our society. The additional requirement is commitment to the highest values of the society.

Following Jefferson, Gardner speaks of a natural aristocracy of talent, but he qualifies that to be a natural aristocracy of talent *and responsibility*.

In a way, I've taught this idea as a kind of theoretical commitment, almost an act of faith—hoping to instill this value in the students who pass through this program on their way to the rest of their lives. I would like to say that the process of preparing for this event, which included tracking down graduates from the 20 years of this program and finding out how they've put their talent to work—how you put your talent to work—has given me a different perspective on this issue.

I've always bragged about the successes of our graduates. Three Ph.D.'s in physics from Rice, several M.D.'s. Four recent graduates are in medical school now—two of them are here today, Amber Dawson and Nathan Lesley, who, by the way, are about to be married. Seniors have been filing into my office recently to tell me about acceptance to graduate or professional school: Aeliya Jafri was accepted at U of H pharmacy school, Chase Kincannon to Baylor Law School, Amanda Baulch to the North Texas doctoral program in English, Peggy Neill to the master's program in geology at UT-Austin. And so many more.

But what has really impressed me is that I keep coming across, not just success but service and responsibility. Many of you are teachers; many of you are involved in your communities in volunteer work; many of you have talked with great pride about raising your children (that sure makes me feel old!). A couple of examples: I just found out that Mark Washington, who works for the city of Fort Worth, went back to school a few years ago to get a seminary degree and is now a minister. In fact, he's meeting with a contractor about doing some remodeling at the church this morning, but he plans to make it by lunch. That's a church that even I might want to go to. Speaking of churches, Laurie (Harveson) Barker and her husband share a ministry.

One discovery I made when I was trying to track down graduates struck me: James Robert Parkey is the only trauma doctor in Henrietta, Texas. He couldn't come for obvious reasons—in fact, he can't ever leave town. But I came across a wonderful newspaper story about how remarkable this man is to stick to this kind of practice in a small town rather than chase the higher salaries and more comfortable hours of a big-city practice.

Teachers often don't get to see the results of their work, because, to put it immodestly, what we try to do is help you prepare for the rest of your life. I hope this event will be rewarding for the graduates of the program, but I can say for sure that it's rewarding for those of us who taught you to see you and find out how well you're doing—and how much of a contribution you

are making.