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## The University of Southern Mississippi Honors College: A Tradition of Excellence

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# The University of Southern Mississippi

## Honors College:

### *A Tradition of Excellence*

#### **Amanda Winters**

*Catalyst Staff Writer*

A close inspection of any college community will reveal students looking to fulfill the entire college experience, students with an eye toward their ideal career after college, students who devour information with an insatiable appetite, revolutionaries out to change the world, and countless others of varying backgrounds and creeds. Whichever category you, the reader, identify with, and regardless of your field of study, you can find a niche in the Honors College at The University of Southern Mississippi. The only unifying criterion for an Honors College student is that he or she is dedicated and open-minded enough to take his or her education to the highest intensity and the widest range possible. If you satisfy that requirement, then the Honors College is worth exploring in depth.

The Honors College is subdivided into two programs: General Honors and Senior Honors. All incoming Honors College freshmen begin their college experience by enrolling in the General Honors program. These students must pass four semesters of *World Thought and Culture*, an interdisciplinary course commonly called "Colloquium." It is a nontraditional integration of history, literature, and philosophy. Colloquium forces students to think "outside the box" while nurturing the skills necessary to excel in settings where they are expected to stay "inside the box." Students also enroll in honors sections of core courses, which are taught at a more challenging level than are other sections. All of these classes, and Colloquium, are relatively small in order to maximize the atmosphere of community and interaction among students and between students and professors.

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In Senior Honors, the survivors (as well as a few ambitious newcomers) continue on the nitty-gritty journey toward their degrees. Senior Honors is designed to broaden the scope of their education through seminar courses taken outside their primary field of study. Many of the students who apply for semesters or summers abroad are in the Senior Honors program as well. However, Senior Honors is specifically designed to aid students in formulating, executing, and presenting an undergraduate research project. This research is, in the words of Dr. Maureen Ryan, dean of the Honors College, "the kind of research that most students don't get the opportunity to do until graduate school."

Here a misconception about the idea of research must be clarified. The research project can be anything from a mural to an original musical or literary composition, to an in-depth study of an issue in history or sociology, to the more traditional laboratory research in psychology, biology, or chemistry.

Indeed, this broad spectrum of research possibilities is necessary for a program that incorporates all majors, as the Honors College does. All Senior Honors students must write a proposal that outlines a prospective research project in their major and argues the importance of such research. They are guided in this task by taking a specially designed course in prospectus writing. Students must also choose a faculty mentor to advise them throughout the project.

Upon completion of the research project, all students make a presentation about their research, complete with PowerPoint slides, in an Honors Symposium before professors and fellow students. The students then receive their degrees, along with Latin designation and a medal as recognition of completion of the Honors College program.

Many benefits of a nonconventional program like the Honors College are immediately obvious. The senior thesis and the interdisciplinary elements of the program, because they represent a rare caliber of intellectual endeavor, make seniors appealing to graduate, law, and medical schools, scholarship committees, and prospective employers. Successful completion of such a demanding project also provides good resume material. Furthermore, the research mandates an application of classroom principles and further learning from experience, both of which provide skills necessary in a future career.

Add to these obvious advantages the not-so-obvious benefits of the atmosphere of heightened scholarship that the Honors College cultivates. The relationships that grow out of an experience like the Honors College are special, too. The Honors College faculty members are always available to counsel students, to advise them about which courses to take, and to chastise them when they skip class or fail to read *Wagner and Philosophy*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, or whatever Colloquium book happens to be due. The close working bond formed between student and faculty mentor can be a unique and rewarding one. Dr. Richardson, coordinator of Senior Honors, comments, "Those relationships really last a lifetime." The friendships among students forged by common experiences and a mutual thirst for knowledge are some of the most enduring friendships there are. Dr. Ryan summarizes these ideas perfectly, "The Honors College is a community of learners. Small classes, dedicated professors, and close interaction among students in and outside the classroom complement the diversity and range of a large, comprehensive university. Scholarships, study abroad opportunities, and personal attention to individual students' needs combined with the exciting interdisciplinary curriculum make the Honors College a unique undergraduate experience."

In the Honors College, all students can indeed get the best of both worlds—small-college intimacy and one-on-one attention, as well as the caliber of research found primarily in large universities and

can take these experiences into the expectant world of tomorrow. ♦

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#### About the Author

*Amanda Winters is an Honors College Presidential Scholar. She is a junior biochemistry major and participates as an undergraduate researcher in the lab of Dr. David Wertz, an environmental chemist and professor at USM. She is a member of American Chemical Society Student Affiliates (ACS-SA), the Circle K Club (a community service organization), and Alpha Lambda Delta and Phi Kappa Phi honor societies.*



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