Taking a Back Seat to No One

Hillyer’s Expanded Honors Program Inspires Students and Faculty

by Judie Jacobson

The leftovers of a February snowstorm were still on the ground one evening in early March when students began arriving at the home of Hillyer Dean David Goldenberg ’73, ’76 on the university’s Asylum Avenue campus. They scarcely seemed to notice. The chill in the air was no match for the buoyant, sun-drenched mood inside—one that seemed perfectly matched to the Hawaiian leis and bright party store palm trees and parrots that dressed up the comfortable home.

Had Dean Goldenberg gone Hawaiian? Sort of. In fact, Hillyer’s popular leader was hosting a reunion for a group of sophomores who had recently returned from the college’s Winterterm trip abroad. Students enrolled in The Arts and Culture of Polynesia, an Honors course designed by Melinda Miceli, assistant professor of sociology, and Anthony Rauche, associate professor of ethnomusicology, participated in a 16-day Honors program expedition to the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Students earned their seats on the plane with hard work and a cumulative 3.0 or better grade point average, achievements that qualified them for Hillyer’s Honors program.

The ground-breaking Honors program—there are only a handful of such programs at two-year colleges across the country—is already making waves with a series of impressive, off-the-beaten-path courses that entice students to make the grade and encourage professors to be innovative.

Goldenberg’s goal was to make Hillyer College “so integral to the university that people see it as an equal partner.” To do that, he enlisted the aid of senior faculty, including economics Associate Professor Jane Horvath, director of Hillyer’s Honors program. Working with faculty, Horvath put together the nuts and bolts of the new, expanded Honors program.

“My goal for the Honors program,” says Horvath, “is to help build a community for those students in Hillyer who are prepared to do honors-level work and to build a culture of excellence within the college while providing opportunity for students interested in the challenge that is honors. It is my hope that these students will go on to participate in honors when they leave Hillyer College.”

What Goldenberg, Horvath, and the Hillyer faculty built is an Honors program that includes a fall seminar in the social and natural sciences for sophomores, a spring seminar in the humanities for freshmen, and a winter course abroad—so far, England (2003), Hawaii (2004), and Greece (upcoming in 2005). The Honors program’s distinctive, one-of-a-kind courses have proven to be a motivational tool for the faculty, too.
Pulitzer Prize Winners

“I had been toying for a long time with the idea for a class in which students would read all the novels nominated that year for the Pulitzer Prize and then play judge in selecting the winning author,” says Michele Troy, assistant professor of English, in explaining the genesis of her Honors course, The Pulitzer Prize in Contemporary America.

Troy, who is in her third year at Hillyer, jumped at the chance to implement a version of her original idea when faculty were asked to submit proposals for Honors-level seminars. Given the go ahead by Horvath and Goldenberg, she devised a spring course highlighted by lectures from two distinguished Pulitzer Prize winners and one Pulitzer nominee. The class heard from Walter Robinson, who led a team of reporters in an investigation of sexual abuse by priests that earned the Boston Globe a 2003 Pulitzer for Public Service; Joel Pett of the Lexington Herald-Leader, who won in 2000 for editorial cartooning and served as a member of the nominating jury in 2002; and, The Hartford Courant’s Brad Clift, who in 2003 was nominated for his feature photography series, Heroin Town, that provoked a clean-up in Willimantic. Some members of the class also attended a Hartford Stage performance of Topdog/Underdog by Suzan-Lori Parks, who became the first African-American woman to win a Pulitzer for drama in 2002.

“I’m really impressed by the students,” says Troy of her class. “They came to class after each lecture with questions and opinions.” The talks, she notes, “engendered exactly the kind of critical and creative thinking that we want to see our students doing.”

Learning from the River

And when students get fired up, so do their teachers. “It was a wonderfully creative and energizing experience for me because I had a class full of bright, motivated people who were eager to learn,” says Renwick Griswold ’73, assistant professor of sociology, of his fall seminar, Natural and Social Science Perspectives of the Connecticut River. The course examined the relationship between mankind and the environment by focusing on the Connecticut River.

Griswold’s students were inspired by the class. Scott Sans ’06 created a documentary in support of maintaining the Rocky Hill Ferry, which the state of Connecticut was considering shutting down. He presented his film at the university’s Undergraduate Research and Creativity Colloquium in April. Alex Kingsbury, also a Hillyer sophomore, describes what he learned on his Web site. “You’d be surprised how much there is going on in the Connecticut River. We learned to read the river…how it was formed…how it helped form our country … the art it inspired. We’ve experienced firsthand the serenity and peacefulness that just drifting along with the river can inspire.”

What makes the Honors program so successful? Give credit where credit is due, says Goldenberg. “Our outstanding faculty decides how to build on the experiences of students and offer them something unique. They believe in our mission to find the untapped potential in our students and bring it out. That’s what makes it easy to be dean—creative people doing creative things and making a difference in the lives of students.”

Do students fully appreciate the richness of their experience? Maybe not today, says Goldenberg, “but we know they will look back and see the impact this program has made on their lives.”

Looking Back and Giving Back

It is precisely that “look back” that inspired one Hillyer alum to help students take advantage of all that the Honors program has to offer by providing each student who wishes to take the Winterterm course abroad with a scholarship to help defray the cost of the trip.

“My experience at Hillyer was spectacular,” says Jay Shaw, a 1974 Hillyer grad who is now managing director of Resource Holdings, Ltd., a New York-based company that he founded. Describing himself as a “mediocre [high school] student at best” who enrolled at Hillyer (then called the College of Basic Studies) only after he was rejected by every other college he applied to, Shaw says, “It was at Hillyer that I learned the joy of knowledge and thinking. Hillyer gave me the support, confidence, and base from which I could build my life. I am very happy to do what I can to enrich the educational and life experiences of the students at Hillyer.”

Shaw, who went on to complete his undergraduate studies at Colgate University and subsequently earned an MBA from New York University’s Stern School of Business, specifically chose to support the program’s Winterterm course abroad because of his own experiences studying in London and Yugoslavia.

“Many, possibly most, people have limited ability to experience and explore other cultures,” he notes. “College is the right time and way to do that. It is, in my view, one of the best ways to really observe another culture, rather than simply seeing it as you pass through on vacation.”

Dean David Goldenberg ’73, ’76 (left) with Jay Shaw ’74 and his wife, Deb, at a reception hosted by Hillyer College this past spring at the university’s American Originals exhibit.