

Reflections on the History of the University Honors Program

by John Hague



Composed on the Occasion of a Celebration of
Forty Years of Honors at Stetson University

In the Spring of 1956 Dean William Hugh McEniry decided that Stetson ought to have an Honors Program. After consulting with several faculty members, he announced the formation of a program which in the first year would only be available to rising seniors. In the fall of 1956 Mary Ann Coslow, Rod Dugliss, Sid Knight, John Morgan, and John Riser became the charter members of the Program. John Hicks was named the faculty director. The students were, upon entering the Program, forgiven whatever requirements were at that time unmet, whether general or departmental in nature. Each student proposed a senior project and asked three or four faculty members to supervise it. Those most often chosen for Honors committees were Lycan, Wynn, Hicks, Stewart, (Dean of the Chapel) Barber, McEniry, Hague, and Copps (Economics). During the year the students wrote a number of short papers related to the major project and discussed each with the members of the committee. A major paper brought the year's work to an end. All of the work was un-graded: successful completion of the projects were noted by H's on the students' transcripts. An H meant simply that the work completed was of Honors caliber. At the end of the year, after orals, the faculty took the five to lunch at Rymals' Restaurant north of town. Sid Knight provided the most memorable reflection when he told the group that it was a good thing for him to

have joined the Program because he would never have read anything otherwise. Gilbert Lycan treated the remarks as a joke, but Sid insisted that he could get a B in any non-science course without reading a book. Gilbert said he knew that Sid had read the books for his Western Civilization course, but Sid stoutly insisted that he never had

The vast majority of Honors Program graduates have had distinguished careers. The ranks include deans, provosts, professors, writers, artists, health care professionals, ministers, and lawyers. Carolyn Miller Parr has been a Federal Judge for more than ten years and has given the Commencement Address at the Stetson Law School. Merrill Maguire Skaggs has been the Dean of the Graduate School at Drew University and has given the Commencement Address on the DeLand Campus. A significant number of Honors Program graduates have been inducted into the Stetson Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.

As the number of students in the Program increased, the burden of staffing committees to supervise independent study programs also grew. In 1959 the standard teaching load was 15 hours, and faculty received no relief for serving on Honors committees. Nevertheless faculty felt honored to be asked by student to serve on their committees, and most found such experiences exhilarating.

In 1960 a number of developments led to major changes in the in the Honors Program. The Director, John Hicks, left the University. That Fall 100 fewer students enrolled than the Admissions Office had expected. Ironically, Stetson's academic reputation was rising, but a new phenomenon was occurring on the national scene. High school seniors began applying for admission to several universities, and, because competition for universities like Duke, Swarthmore, and Amherst was becoming more intense, the students applying to these institutions would also apply to one or two "good" institutions like Stetson or Furman. Stetson therefore became a "backup" choice for students who hoped to get into a more prestigious school. The admissions staff at Stetson knew that in order to get an entering class of five-hundred they normally had to admit eight-hundred (the figures are imaginary, but illustrative), so they admitted the number they expected to produce the desired number of freshman, and the result was 100 fewer students than anticipated. There was a famous meeting in the President's office attended by every top administrator in the University in which Jolly Ollie (as President Edmunds was fondly known) began by asking, "What the Hell happened?" To top matters off, Dean McEniry was arguing that we had to find a way to make the Honors Program available to more students and also to ease the burden on faculty participating in the Program.

Thus several questions demanded answers. If Stetson was competing for more qualified students, what did it have to attract them? How could faculty members, already stretched to the limit, find a way

to give something extra to superior students? Could we save the benefits of independent study for outstanding students and make such efforts cost effective?

John Hague became the new Director and proposed that Stetson make Honors a four-year program. To accomplish this, the University agreed to offer Honors sections in freshman English, math, and history courses. The University also agreed to the creation of a year-long Junior Honors seminar to be taught jointly by Professors, Colwell, Hague, and Taylor. Each professor would receive credit for teaching a full course, and, in return, one of the three would serve on each of the committees supervising senior research.

From the beginning the Honors Oral was a central feature of the Program. For the first fifteen years the oral lasted at least two hours. Students suffered through these exams because they had no alternative and because they were constantly assured that the exams were excellent training for similar graduate program ordeals.

By 1963 the University had replaced the Honors sections of Freshman courses with specially designed Honors seminars in humanities and social sciences. These were interdisciplinary efforts. In the social sciences, students spent half the semester in one discipline and the other half in a second discipline. Since the course was a year-long undertaking, students would be exposed to four disciplines within the social sciences.

The humanities seminar fell under the spell of Kathleen Johnson who was an interdisciplinary whirlwind. Kathleen ruled with a warm heart and an iron fist. I well remember a conversation I had with me in the Spring of 1967. She had nine students

in the humanities seminar, and the Dean was expressing alarm about the specter of grade inflation. Kathleen came to me with a worried look on her face and said that she was afraid she was going to have to give 9 As, something she had never done in her entire career. I told her that she should give everyone an A if they earned it, and coming from her the Dean wouldn't even blink.

By the end of the sixties two major changes had occurred in the Honors Program. They were, I think, responses to national trends. The first was a response to increasingly stiff competition to get into graduate and professional schools. Students were spending more and more time taking courses in their majors, and, consequently, were spending less and less time in independent study. The Honors

program countered by offering independent study opportunities in natural science, social science, and humanities. The second change was a response to student demands to have a more responsible role in shaping their academic programs. As a result, students were elected to positions on the Honors Council and on the Honors Executive Committee. The Honors Council in those days functioned both as a Curriculum Committee, and as an Assessment Committee. Moreover, wonder of wonders, they didn't report to anybody. The Committee had real power, and it was continually revising course structures and content.