

## THE HONORS COLLEGE:

# If You Build It, They Will Come

*The dean of OU's newest college has devised  
a game plan to challenge the superscholars  
and inspire the underachievers.*

Most of us have experienced turning points, those critical times when our lives seem to pivot and move in a different direction. For me that moment came during the spring of 1976. I was a pimply-faced, 19-year-old sophomore at Widener College, a small liberal arts college outside of Philadelphia. To that point, my only ambition in life was to play professional baseball. Looking back with the advantage of hindsight, I realize that my dreams far outstripped my meager talent—as opposing batters pointed out every time I stepped onto the mound—but youthful naiveté and a lively imagination kept the hope alive.

Convinced that my 70-mile-per-hour fast ball (with a strong wind at my back!) would be my ticket to the big leagues, I never devoted much attention to the mundane aspects of school, such as studying and doing homework. During my senior year in high school, I had failed three of five subjects and graduated in the bottom third of my class. I did, however, manage to receive one award at graduation—the seniors' unanimous choice for class clown.

College seemed destined to be more of the same: while my classmates were trying

to understand the basics of engineering, I was trying desperately to figure out how to throw a slider. Until, that is, I walked into Lawrence Buck's class in medieval history. Most of what I knew about medieval history I had learned from Monty Python movies, and I had little motivation to expand my knowledge. But that soon changed. Three days a week I sat in the back of the room and marveled at Buck's command of the language, his wide-ranging knowledge and, perhaps most of all, his genuine enthusiasm for his subject and his commitment to sharing it with us. The stimulating classroom discussions were evidence of Buck's infectious enthusiasm. Of course, I never participated in those discussions, but day after day I sat watching intently and wondering, "Why can't I be like them?"

The constant exposure to an enthusiastic teacher and bright students took its toll. One afternoon I went to the baseball field to shag fly balls in the outfield, as I had almost every day for the previous 15 years. But my life had changed forever. I strolled off the field in the middle of practice, turned in my varsity uniform and walked to the library to begin my new life. *continued*



THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

BY STEVEN M. GILLON

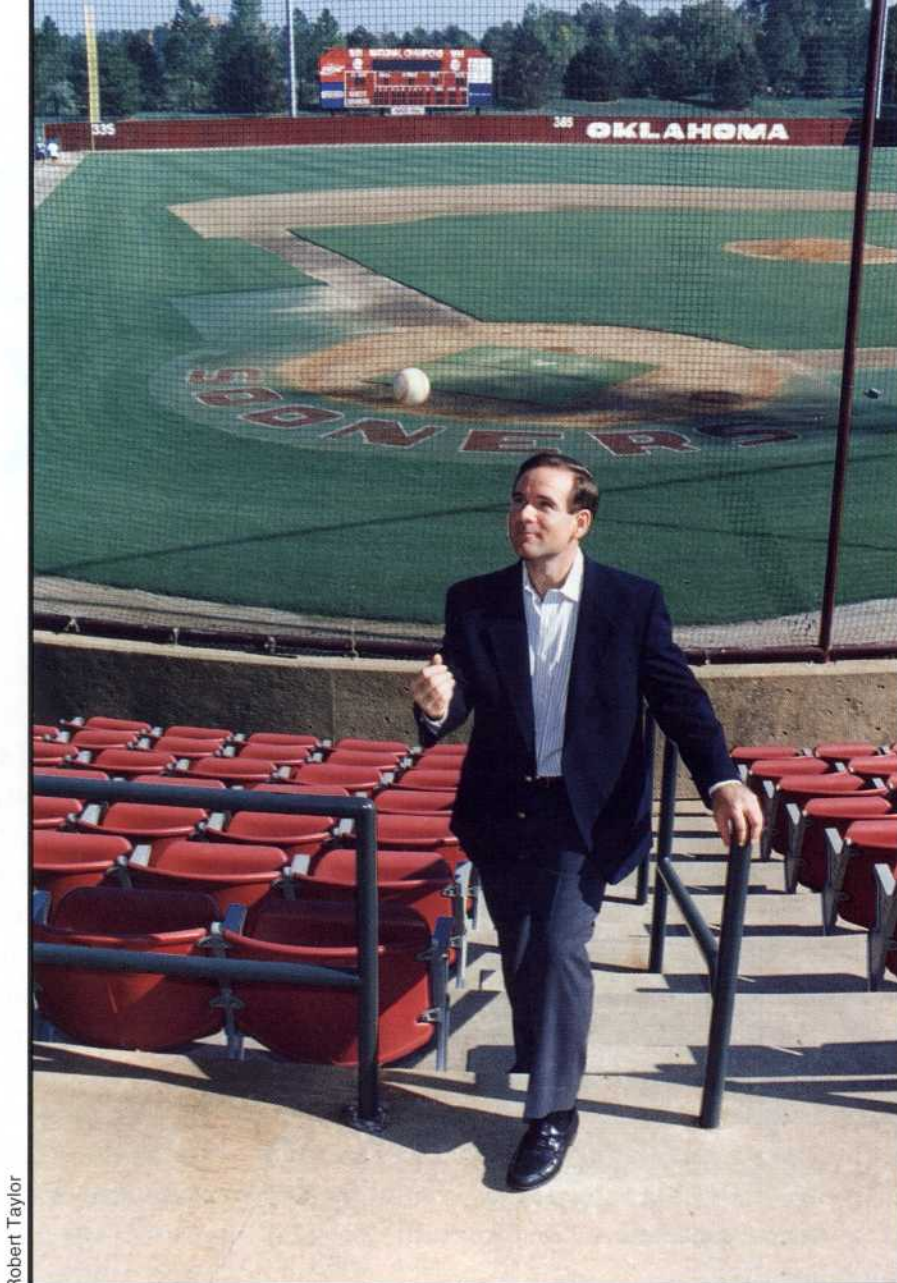
I enjoy sharing that story because it explains a great deal about me and about my ambitions for the Honors College. Many honors programs and colleges have one central mission: to educate the most gifted students, usually by segregating them from the rest of the student body. Not ours. My goal is to create an environment that will challenge the brightest students while also inspiring those underachievers who have yet to realize their fullest potential. The University of Oklahoma Honors College strives to create a dynamic learning environment that will allow every student to realize his or her greatest potential. When you boil it all down, my motivations are very simple and quite personal—I want to give other students the same opportunities that education has provided me.

Thanks to the broad vision and creative energy of President David Boren, we have the opportunity to create such an environment at the University of Oklahoma. The Honors College is one of the most exciting places in higher education anywhere in the world. While many universities are scaling back offerings, cutting faculty positions and cramming more students into ever-larger classes, we are moving in the opposite direction—expanding offerings, hiring new faculty and offering smaller, more personalized classes.

Honors has a long tradition at OU.

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Established in the early 1960s, the program was revitalized when Nancy Mergler (now senior vice president and Norman campus provost) became director in 1987. Over the next decade Mergler and her successor, Carolyn Morgan (now associate dean of honors), created the intellectual scaffold-



Robert Taylor

Throughout high school and into college, Steve Gillon's only ambition was to play professional baseball. Then one day he walked into a classroom where an enthusiastic history professor and group of bright students changed his life forever. Today Gillon strives to give other students the same opportunities that education has given him.

ing for one of the largest and most respected programs in the country. Today, more than 1,700 students are enrolled in the Honors College, studying everything from engineering to literature to business administration. All honors students are required to complete 20 hours of honors classes and write a senior essay.

Last year the OU Board of Regents elevated honors to college status, and we have a number of new programs planned for the future. As we launch our new initiatives a few key rules will guide us:

***Rule #1: Students learn more from each other than from faculty and administrators.***

Too much education in American colleges and universities is passive: students are forced to endure large lecture classes where they listen politely to lectures with few, if any, opportunities to engage the material or question the professor. I believe the key to developing a stimulating classroom environment is providing opportunities for students to learn from each

other as well as from the teacher. I call this method the conflagration theory of education: you create sparks of excitement and then watch as the wildfire spreads.

In order to help light the sparks, we restrict all honors sections to 22 or fewer students. The emphasis is on teaching students to think critically about the material and not just to believe something because the professor says it is true. All new classes in the college will be writing-intensive, forcing students to develop the ability to express their ideas both verbally and in writing. We all know that the key to success is not only to have bright ideas but also to be able to convey them to others.

We are providing our students with exciting new classroom experiences. This summer Melanie Wright launched a very successful "Honors at Oxford" program. Students began their studies in Norman before flying to England and completing the class at Brasenose College, Oxford. Unlike most American programs at Oxford, our students worked in private tutorials with distinguished Oxford dons—which is the way classes have been taught at Oxford and Cambridge for centuries. Of course, they also had the opportunity to take advantage of all the cultural opportunities of living near one of Europe's most enchanting capitals.

I also believe in the importance of creating the social space where learning can take place outside the formal setting of the classroom. Education must consist of more than the 12 hours spent in the classroom each week; we need to create a dynamic living/learning community that makes critical thinking and intelligent interaction a part of everyday life. At Yale I spent eight years in a faculty apartment in one of the undergraduate colleges. I was convinced that most of the education took place not in the classroom but in the dining hall or in the courtyard where students would gather to discuss homework assignments or lectures. We are creating a similar fully integrated living/learning environment in the Honors College, where a new \$3 million addition will add faculty offices, new seminar rooms, study areas and a courtyard to the Honors House.

**Rule #2: Hire professors who appreciate the importance of both research and teaching.**

Perhaps the most common complaint that I have heard over the years from students is that their professors are more interested in their own research than in teaching. My experience always has been that effective teaching and meaningful research go hand-in-hand. Being an active researcher makes me a better teacher because it allows me to share my ideas and interpretations with the class. I have discovered that students often are reassured knowing that their professor is

ways. I cannot tell you how many times I ran back from a seminar to my office to write down notes about new ideas I learned from my students.

This year the college hired three exciting new professors who share that philosophy. All three are among the most promising young scholars in their respective fields, and all are passionate about teaching. Ari Kelman, who completed his Ph.D. in environmental history at Brown, is the recipient of Brown University's prestigious President's Award for Excellence in Teaching. Julia C. Ehrhardt, who received her Ph.D. in American Studies at Yale, has won a long list of prizes



Robert Taylor

New to the Honors College faculty is Benjamin Alpers, who studied at Harvard, Oxford and later Princeton, where he also taught and redesigned the American Studies program.

engaged in the same process of truth-seeking and struggling with many of the same questions that confound them.

At the same time, being in the classroom every day with bright, curious students makes you a better scholar. My students always keep me on my toes, often asking the obvious—but frequently overlooked—question, forcing me to look at the material in fresh

and fellowships for her research and teaching on women writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Also joining us is Benjamin Alpers, who studied at Harvard, Oxford and Princeton, and who spent three years as an instructor at Princeton, where he redesigned the American Studies program and helped create and teach an interdisciplinary course in the American Experience. *continued*

**Rule #3: Allow students the opportunity to grow outside the classroom.**

Every year the University attracts hundreds of scholarship students from nearly every state and a number of foreign countries. I believe it is important to provide these students with the chance to give something back for all that the University gives them. We are developing an extensive outreach program that will provide the brightest students in the University with the chance to help their peers. The college plans to sponsor a number of mentoring programs that would allow honors students to tutor classmates struggling with difficult classes in math and science. We are exploring installing a homework hotline where students in the college will provide assistance to high school students from around the state. In addition, many local professionals have volunteered their time to help mentor honors students, giving them a glimpse of life in their chosen profession. Dozens of students spend a few days each month shadowing local physicians, lawyers, dentists, engineers, religious leaders and social workers.

**Rule #4: Develop interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary classes that force students to think about the world in new ways.**

The focus of the Honors College is on interdisciplinary classes, in breaking down the artificial walls that divide disciplines. Every semester we offer students dozens of innovative and creative courses that do not fit into the narrow disciplinary boxes of specific departments. This year, for example, the new honors faculty will be team-teaching an introductory course on "The American Experience," which will draw insight from history, literature, popular culture and political science. This semester students are enrolled in a seminar on "Literature and Medicine," which examines how novels, short sto-

Honors College Associate Dean Carolyn Morgan, right, confers with Julia Ehrhardt, a Yale Ph.D. and authority on women writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who came to OU in fall 1998. In the background are architect's drawings of the college's new facilities, currently under construction.



Robert Taylor

Ari Kelman, second from left, received the Brown University's President's Award for Excellence in Teaching before joining Steve Gillon's young faculty at the OU Honors College.

ries and poetry deal with medical issues and the doctor-patient relationship. Others have enrolled in "Deep Time, Deep Space," which examines how scientific ideas impact society.

One of the biggest problems with major research universities is that the most senior scholars on campus rarely

have much contact with freshmen. They spend most of their time with graduate students and advanced undergraduates. We are trying to address that problem by organizing the Freshman Forum. Each week a senior faculty member volunteers to meet with a small group of freshmen to talk with



Robert Taylor

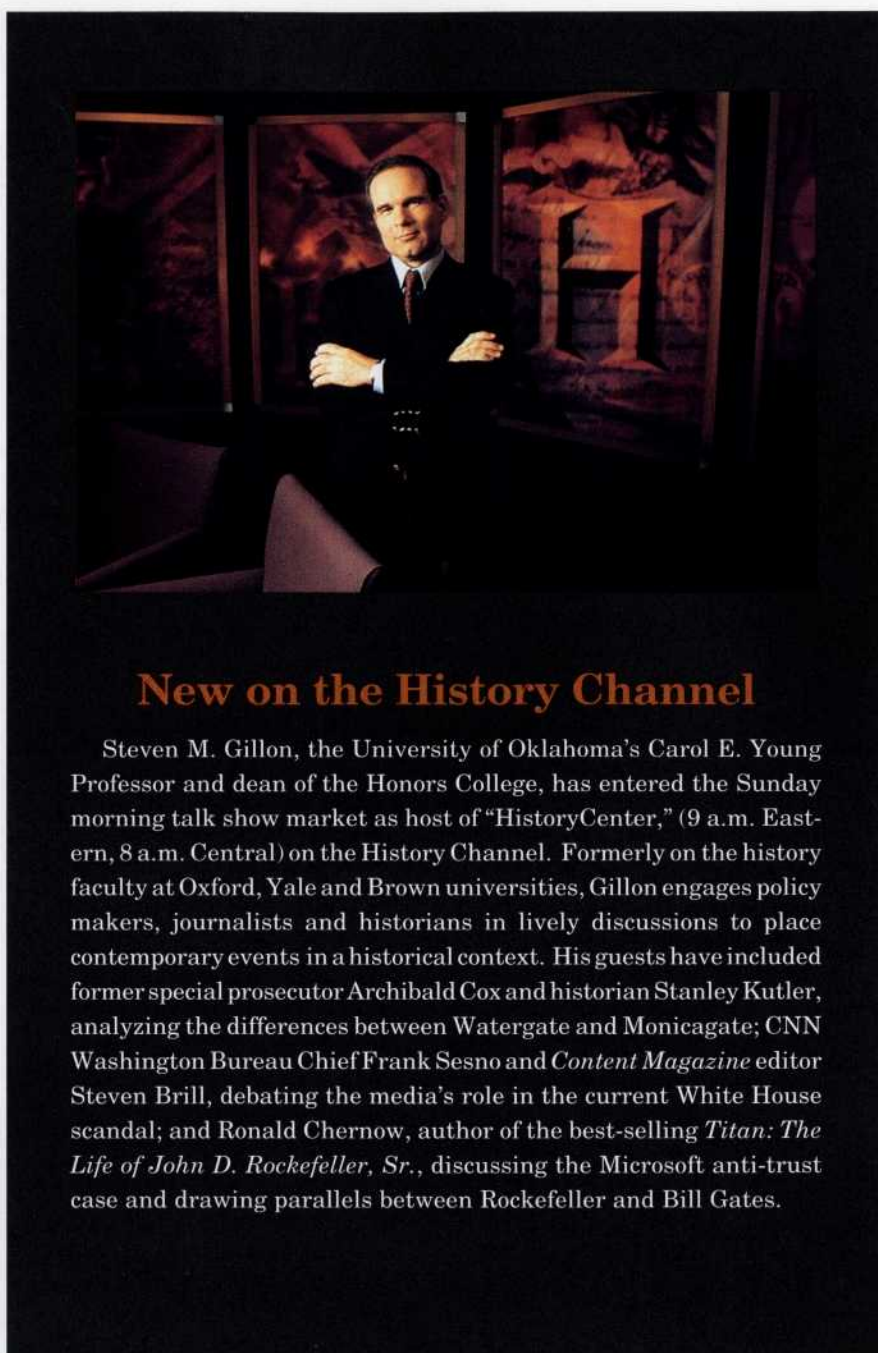
them about his or her field. Students leave the class with an appreciation for the intellectual passion of individual faculty members and with a greater sense of the tremendous human resources this great University has to offer.

**Rule #5: *The entire University community must benefit from our presence.***

Many people fear that the Honors College will become an ivory tower constructed in the middle of the campus, surrounded by a moat and cut off from the rest of the University. Nothing could be further from the truth. All of our activities are designed to promote the interaction between the college and the rest of the campus. Our students take most of their classes in the larger University; our faculty teach general education classes; and our mentoring program sends honors students as ambassadors to the local community.

We offer faculty throughout the University the opportunity to develop interdisciplinary classes, participate in workshops and team-teach classes with honors faculty. We have forged a partnership with students and faculty that enriches the entire University community. Each semester the Honors College awards more than \$12,000 to undergraduate students and their faculty mentors for research and creative activity. The competition is open to *all* students. Each spring the college hosts an "Undergraduate Research Day," in which student scholars share their research with their peers.

We strive to benefit the larger Oklahoma community by serving as an intellectual magnet, pulling talented people into the state and then keeping them here. Our goal is to create a "reverse brain drain"—not only providing the state's finest talent with a strong incentive to develop their careers in Oklahoma, but also attracting skilled students from across the country and introducing them to this state's enormous resources. In the past many of our brightest students have felt they had to leave the state in order to receive the finest education. No more. Students attending the Honors College receive an education on par with the finest private universities in the country.



## New on the History Channel

Steven M. Gillon, the University of Oklahoma's Carol E. Young Professor and dean of the Honors College, has entered the Sunday morning talk show market as host of "HistoryCenter," (9 a.m. Eastern, 8 a.m. Central) on the History Channel. Formerly on the history faculty at Oxford, Yale and Brown universities, Gillon engages policy makers, journalists and historians in lively discussions to place contemporary events in a historical context. His guests have included former special prosecutor Archibald Cox and historian Stanley Kutler, analyzing the differences between Watergate and Monicagate; CNN Washington Bureau Chief Frank Sesno and *Content Magazine* editor Steven Brill, debating the media's role in the current White House scandal; and Ronald Chernow, author of the best-selling *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.*, discussing the Microsoft anti-trust case and drawing parallels between Rockefeller and Bill Gates.

**Rule #6: *Perhaps the most important rule of all is never to forget that students are the lifeblood of the University.***

Sometimes it is easy for administrators to lose sight of why we became educators. Our days become so congested with meetings and memos that we forget that our highest priority is to have a positive impact on the lives of our students. Lawyers measure suc-

cess by the cases they win, business people by the deals made and profit earned. The measure of success for a teacher is less tangible: the light that you see in the eyes of a student who has just learned how to solve a difficult problem, the satisfaction of seeing your students grow and mature during their years in college.

Many years ago a dedicated teacher touched my life. Now it is my turn to return the favor. 