
Honors College challenges OU's best and brightest

BY WHITNEY BRYEN

In 1964, OU President George Lynn Cross established the Honors Program, providing advanced educational opportunities for the university's most academically ambitious students. The program focused on small-class size and distinguished faculty as it grew during the next three decades. President Boren brought the program to new heights in 1997 when he elevated it to the Joe C. and Carole Kerr McClendon Honors College.

Since becoming a separate academic entity with its own dean, the college has expanded support for undergraduate research; launched study abroad programs; established a writing center; and produced dozens of national scholarship and fellowship recipients. Since 2000, OU has produced four Rhodes Scholars, 35 Goldwater Scholars and 71 Fulbright Scholars.

Interim Dean Doug Gaffin, who succeeded David Ray following his December 2017 retirement, says Boren's initiation of the Honors College solidified the program.

"He certainly made us a priority," says Gaffin. "It legitimizes the program and allows us to recruit outstanding students, as well as faculty, and provides opportunities for more funding, better organization and staff."

This spring, there are about 2,500 undergraduate students in the Honors College, which is housed in David L. Boren Hall. Students can be admitted to the college as freshmen or throughout their undergraduate program, but all must meet minimum GPA requirements and complete an essay before being accepted. Students who complete at least 18 honors credits and maintain at least a 3.4 GPA will graduate from OU with cum laude, magna cum laude or summa cum laude status.

The college offers a range of lower- and upper-division courses that are capped at 22 students to ensure deeper discussions and connections between students and faculty, Gaffin

says. Classes on African culture, evolution in modern society, economics and discrimination, food and culture, Shakespeare, and American religion are among the college's spring offerings. All honors classes are aimed at teaching students critical thinking and include heavy reading and writing requirements, he says.

An abundance of faculty, staff and student-led programs provide even more opportunities for students to challenge themselves.

About 40 informal reading groups are offered each semester under one of the college's most popular programs started

by, and now named in honor of, former Dean David Ray. The groups, similar to book clubs, are open to all OU students and highlight an eclectic mix of literature such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies*, Thomas Friedman's latest work on the modern age of acceleration, the autobiography of a hip-hop legend and more.

The Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program, Honors Research Assistant Program and First Year Research Experience support student research across all academic disciplines. The annual Undergraduate

Research Day gives students a chance to present their work to an audience during Mom's Day and students can submit papers for publication in the *Honors Undergraduate Research Journal* each spring.

A backpacking trip for new freshmen, medical humanities programs that combine arts and sciences, writing groups, cookouts, film nights and study abroad trips that include the noted Honors at Oxford are just a few of the many opportunities afforded by the Honors College.

"The special thing is that we have the power of a major research university, but we're like a small liberal arts college within the university, so you get the best of both worlds here," Gaffin says. ▶



Former OU Honors College Dean David Ray (with glasses, right) leads an informal reading group. These book groups were started by Ray at the Honors College and are named in his honor. Today, some 40 informal reading groups are open to all OU students.

Honors College leads to career in social justice for OU alumna

As far back as she can remember, Madison Melon-McLawn wanted to be a lawyer. Even in elementary school, it was her go-to response for “what do you want to be when you grow up?” Melon-McLawn pictured herself as the attorney in TV shows, movies and John Grisham novels, but it wasn’t until she entered the OU Honors College that her career began to take shape.

“It opened my eyes to the world,” Melon-McLawn says. “I grew up in northwest Oklahoma City and I always had a sense that I was lucky and that not everyone had the life I had, but I couldn’t really see it. Honors College classes really opened my eyes to what it’s like for people who don’t have the privilege – in the U.S. and across the world, really – that I had.”

The 28-year-old says honors classes in such subjects as Women’s Literature and Girl Culture, a study abroad trip to Italy and the influence of strong, women professors like Julia Ehrhardt built the foundation for her success and passion for justice. As a student, Melon-McLawn led a feminist reading group through the Honors College, served nonprofits as a founding board member, worked for the Center for Social Justice and was a student consultant for The Oklahoma Group.

In 2011, Melon-McLawn graduated with honors from OU’s Women’s and Gender Studies Program and went on to receive her law degree from Georgetown University. After graduation, she returned to Oklahoma City, where she passed the bar exam and became an assistant public defender for Oklahoma County.

Melon-McLawn worked on misdemeanors and men-

tal health court until December 2015 when she took over as drug court public defender. Late last year, she also began helping pregnant women and mothers through an incarceration alternative treatment program called Remerge Oklahoma. Melon-McLawn supports clients from the moment they enter the program in an orange jumpsuit through applying for jobs, buying a car, finding stable housing and getting their children back.

“I’m there for them, whatever they need from me,” she says. “I’m a lawyer who can stand up for them in court, but I can also be there as their friend and they can trust me and can count on me. Helping them become productive members of society, it’s just the best.”

Last year, Melon-McLawn was recognized as “Oklahoma’s Next Generation of Leaders and Achievers” for her work as a public defender by the NextGen Under 30 Oklahoma program.

In October, Melon-McLawn launched a weekly adult education class to help people studying for their GED. She and her mother-in-law, a retired teacher, lead the lessons, which are designed around the students’ pace and do not adhere to a strict syllabus like other courses that can be overwhelming for some participants, she says.

“I remember talking in classes about the systemic inequalities in this country and how the cycle of poverty is so pervasive and so hard to break,” Melon-

McLawn says. “The system is so broken that I started thinking maybe I want to be a public defender and if I’m going to do this work, which is really hard, then I want to do it for my people, in my home.”



The OU’s Honors College helped form the conscience and calling of Oklahoma City public defender Madison Melon-McLawn, named among “Oklahoma’s Next Generation of Leaders and Achievers.”

Education created a world traveler, now it brings him back to Oklahoma.

Growing up in small-town, rural Oklahoma, OU alumnus Jordan Cannon never dreamed he would one day speak four languages and travel to the far corners of the world – an ongoing journey inspired by the OU Honors College.

Cannon joined the Honors College as a freshman and in his second semester took American Federal Government with former Honors Dean David Ray.

“It was the most formative class I took at OU,” Cannon says. “I was from a very small town and I had never had an intellectual opportunity like that. It really highlighted the quality of the faculty, and there were people similar to me who really challenged me and motivated me to push my limits mentally.”

Through the Honors College, Cannon assisted a professor who was conducting research on religious extremism in the U.S. and sat on the editing board for the college’s annual *Undergraduate Research Journal*. Cannon studied Arabic in Egypt as a Flagship Scholar and in Morocco

as a recipient of the Boren Award for International Study. He graduated with dual degrees in Arabic and International Security Studies in 2012.

Cannon returned to Oklahoma for only a few months before jetting overseas again to teach in South Korea and the West Bank before joining the Peace Corps. Cannon deferred law school for two years to serve as a teacher in rural China on the advice of several OU professors and mentors, including a few from the Honors College.

“Actually, it was an honors class called Law and Punishment where my interest in China really started,” Cannon says. “I had been accepted into the Peace Corps and law school and I spoke with some of my old professors at OU and they basically all said I would be a fool not to go to China. I probably wouldn’t have done it if it weren’t for their advice.”

Cannon returned to the United States last June and began law school at the University of Michigan in the fall. Following his first year of law school, Cannon will intern at the U.S. Attorney’s office in Detroit this summer and has his eye on a program with the World Trade Organization that would take him to Geneva in 2019, bringing his travel tally to 18 countries. These trips continue to inspire Cannon’s future plans, which include eventually returning to Oklahoma.

Cannon is considering specializing in trade law and hopes

to put his travel experience and language skills to use and to address issues impacting communities in rural Oklahoma, like Braman where Cannon grew up.

“I think Oklahoma has been the victim of international trade agreements. There are losers in these trade agreements, and some of that is because manufacturing bases are drying up in rural communities like the one I grew up in and those people are being hurt by that,” Cannon says. “I saw the effect that international trade has had on my community, and my upbringing is definitely playing a role here. I’d love to

come back to Oklahoma and give back and see if I can affect some sort of change.”



Jordan Cannon (back, center) with students in his American culture class in Guizhou, China. The intellectual environment Cannon experienced as an OU Honors College student led to a life of world travel and service that has included learning four languages.

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