

What Price Honors?

By Carol J. Robinson, '59journ

FOR years the social scientist, welfare worker and special educator have been directing public concern toward the below average student, the one for whom allowances must be made, training devised and a place found—and rightly so. Belated discovery has revealed, however, that the other end of the scale is in need of balancing by concern for the superior mind.

Unconsciously, American-brand education has been neglecting the bright student while building up his slower counterpart in a search of the mythical "average." Today the world is faced with a situation in which "average" is not good enough.

The dilemma of educating the superior student is most acute in the tax-supported institutions where enrolment cannot be restricted to the college-level mind, but must encompass many-leveled children of tax-paying parents. The University of Oklahoma is no exception.

Development of a so-called "honors program" at O.U. has always been an academic stepchild in the division of finances, manpower and facilities. But genuine and fairly wide-spread concern throughout the administration, faculty and even students over the past few years may be bringing "honors" into its own within the University family.

A rather disjointed program for the honor student does exist at O.U., and in some respects, it is a good one. The great fault lies not so much in its character, but in its scope. If the program is reaching 1% of the student body when it should touch 10%, the program is too small. If it is good for arts and sciences but not for engineering or pharmacy or business, the program is too narrow.

The value of a special four-year curriculum for the superior student, one in which he would be restricted to classes with other superior students, is considered doubtful by most of those involved in O.U. honors. The University has no desire to create a segregated "undergraduate intelligentsia" and lose the contribution which these students should be making to the regular academic program.

The answer would seem to lie in curriculum planning and independent studies for the brighter collegian which would relax the set requirements and allow him a deeper and wider range of pursuits within the existing course structure. Some special classes and seminars with other honor students must be included, but not to the exclusion of a normal curriculum.

Dr. William E. Livezey, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, where most

of the honors spadework has been done, sees the need of a part-time director for the program.

Certainly personnel is one of the weaknesses in O.U.'s existing program. Any faculty member who contributes his time to work with superior students must do so in addition to his regular teaching load, a task that can be more time consuming than his regular classes.

The exception to this rule is in the most elementary of the types of honors programs now in operation—the setting aside of special sections of existing classes for outstanding students. English has been using this method for many years, a trend more recently adopted by chemistry, government, physics, plant sciences and economics. Scores made by enrollees on University placement examinations are used in selection of students for these special sections.

Acceleration, as an honors program device, is receiving limited attention at O.U. in the form of advanced standing examinations, offered by every area except law and medicine. Students who feel themselves adequately versed in a subject may seek credit by examination in up to ¼ their total credit hours without enrolling in the course.

Generally the value of acceleration in honors is not in making it possible for the student to reduce his time in college, but to allow him more time to spend in the area of his choice.

The University (in Arts and Sciences) has also created classes in many departments in special studies and directed readings, which may be taken for credit by a student who has completed the regular course and wishes to do more concentrated research on some phase of the subject.

Students are carefully screened before they are allowed to enroll, since, as Dean Livezey phrases it, "The faculty is not wild to take on supervision of such individual work unless the students are sincerely interested in additional specialized work."

Enrollees in special studies and directed readings must have a 2.5 overall grade average with a 2.75 from the preceding semester. Oral and written examinations are administered by a 3-member faculty committee.

Many students who come to O.U. with a clearly defined educational objective—or who develop one after arrival—find that standard degree requirements (24 hours of major work, 12 hours of minor) fail to

fulfill their needs. From 10 to 15 of the more intent ones dig around in the University bulletin until they come across Arts and Sciences' three-field major.

By this plan, the student is allowed to divide 36 hours of major work (over and above introductory courses) among three related fields. Typical would be a combination which involves study of history, government and economics with an eye toward government service or law. Only the above average (3.0—B—or better) are permitted to participate in the triple major—and then only with the approval of the chairmen of the three departments and the Arts and Sciences dean.

A more specialized version of the triple major is the Letters curriculum—established as a "school" in its own right in 1929 but since reduced in status. Letters majors—75 of them this semester—concentrate on history, literature and philosophy.

No Letters classes as such exist for these superior students. Instead they are guided into existing classes designed to give them a sound liberal education. The man who does the guiding is Letters director, Dr. Philip Nolan, whose time is spent with each individual student in working out a

mutually agreeable program to fulfill the aims of the curriculum:

1. history—for the long range perspective of the facts of the past.

2. literature—to portray the facts imaginatively.

3. philosophy—to analyze these facts.

Up in the air, head-in-the-clouds type education? To the intensely practical-minded, perhaps. But then Letters does not pretend to be technical training and guarantees no job after graduation. Strangely enough, however, the jobs have been forthcoming.

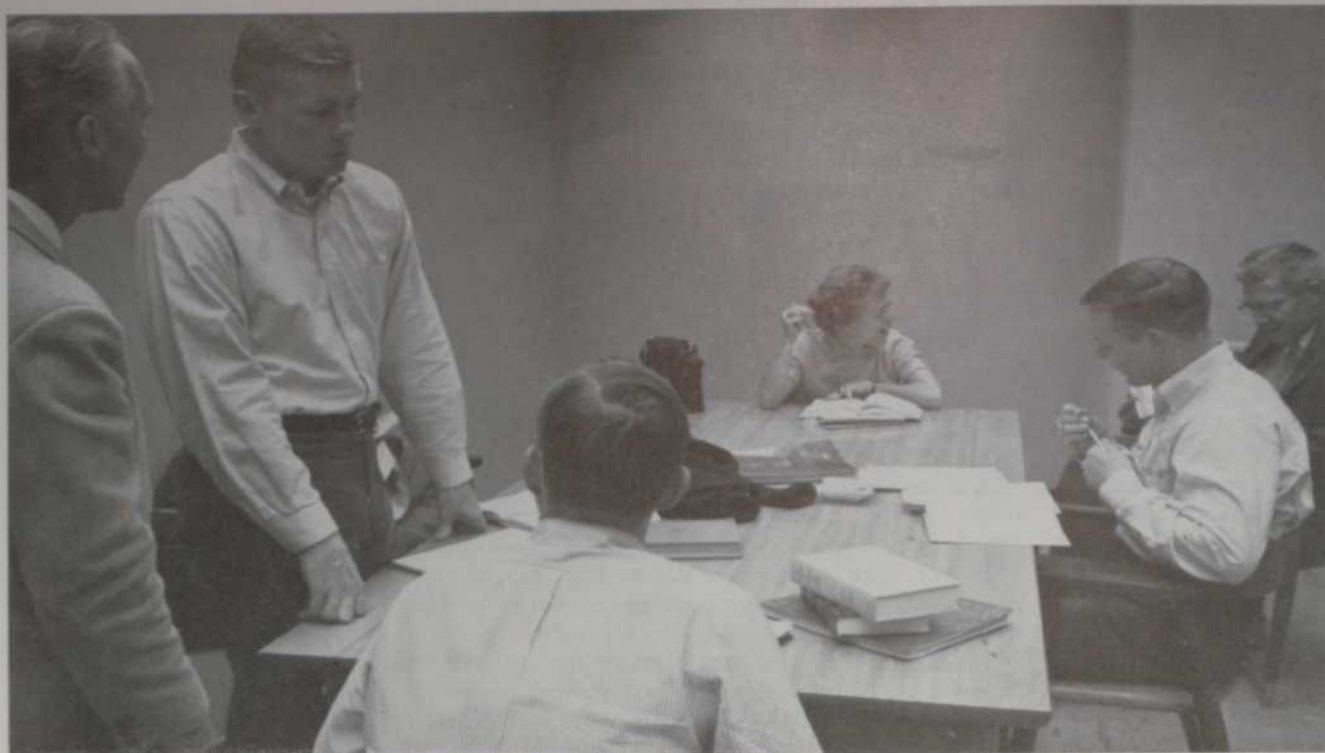
While many graduates of this program go into professional schools, do graduate work in the humanities, medicine or law, many go directly into business. The trend seems to be toward more on-the-job training of men with liberal arts background.

"Thus far no one has ever suffered from a good background in humanities and social studies," Dr. Nolan insists. "No one ever will. We try to give these students the intellectual background and poise to deal with anyone they meet . . . to make them better people."

The only phase of O.U.'s studies for superior students which results in a special



Dr. Philip J. Nolan (second from left) usually has an office full of his Letters students, such as Bill Rockett, Drumright junior; Robert Owen, Bartlesville sophomore; Marilyn McDowell, Oklahoma City, senior, and Susan Shaw, Tulsa junior.



In library conference room set aside for "degree with highest honors" work, Dr. Eugene Springer (left) talks with Jerry Smith, while Dr. Kenneth Crook (right) discusses the seminar with Helen Merritt, John O'Neal and John Lottinville (back to camera).

honor degree—Arts and Sciences' "degree with highest honors"—is a rugged program of independent study followed only by those possessing an unusually wide range of interest, great ability and endless energy.

These students must declare their intention of trying for the degree by the second semester of their junior year, have a 3.5 overall grade average with their last 60 hours in residence.

Before the "degree with highest honors" is granted, the student must pass oral examinations (comparable to orals for the master's degree) covering five fields—a social science, a natural science, a biological science, a humanity and a language and its literature.

All this study, which includes seminars every other week and extensive directed reading and research, is over and above the students' regular load and neither replaces nor affects the established degree program. On such a basis, the "degree with highest honors" asks too much. Achieving the required competence in five different fields is impossible—and indeed perhaps it should be impossible.

Chemistry's Dr. Kenneth Crook, chairman of the supervising "highest honors" committee, maintains that some of the students come surprisingly close—and no

one who has completed the program and come up for the orals has done other than satisfactory.

In most minds, the "highest honors" should be the core of any successful honors program—and yet this semester there are five students pursuing the degree. Only one or two finish the program each year.

Perhaps as Dr. Crook believes, to enlarge the scope would destroy its character as a small study group as well as to over-reach the supply of students capable of maintaining the pace. On the other hand if the University is not attracting more than five "honor" students willing and able to achieve its highest degree—there is something drastically wrong with its program.

But if any program is to be a success, it must receive the active support of faculty and administration, as well as students. The overwhelming majority of students who matriculate in the College of Arts and Sciences are only vaguely aware that a "degree with highest honors" exists.

It is all very well to assume that the really superior student will search out a way to pursue his special interest. Yet nearly all those in "highest honors" were directed there by some interested faculty member who took the time to inform them.

To resolve the honors problem, President George L. Cross has created an all-Uni-

versity honors committee headed by Dr. Oliver Benson, chairman of the department of government.

The committee's job is to meet with the deans to explore the special problems of each college, to digest the suggestions of committee members and to advise the University (faculty) Senate on the feasibility of an honors system encompassing every area of the University of Oklahoma.

On paper such an undertaking looks like a good idea. But it is doubtful that any one program can be devised to meet the needs of every college.

Bringing the outstanding students from each college together is full of advantages in enriching the educational scope of all concerned. However, the question of the selection of subject matter for the added variety of interests must be considered. There is such a thing as too broad an education—one which would either be too difficult, too shallow or too unwieldy.

The idea back of the Arts and Sciences' approach is sound but underdeveloped. Its different phases need unification and strengthening. If an all-University committee were to supervise equally appropriate honors programs in the other colleges and departments at O.U., the University might begin to meet the challenge being presented by the superior mind.