In the university system, each individual department undergoes a periodic reevaluation, in which the department determines what its goals are and how it strives to meet them, usually with regard to a mission statement and the types of courses that are being offered. This can only be accomplished by both reflecting on the past and by looking toward the future, and it is only a fair evaluation if the needs of all parties are considered—students, faculty, and administration. This is Quest's very introductory evaluation of the Mercyhurst College Honors Program's course offerings.

Over the past few years, there have been approximately 12-16 Honors courses offered each year, between three and six each term. Faculty representing most departments have taught courses in this time, although there are some exceptions and some patterns to the system.

Deciding who gets to teach Honors courses is "a negotiation between the Honors program and each department, based on fitting the needs of teaching capability and student interest," reported Dr. Douglas Boudreau, who is in the process of concluding his first year at the helm of the MCHP this term.

Student interest in courses is usually determined by requirements and interests. If classes fall outside of students' majors, there is usually only one reason to take a course: It falls into the Core Curriculum, the cluster of 10 Common Core and eight Distribution Core courses that must be completed in addition to a student's major requirements in order to graduate.

Given that most degree programs require between 50-60 credits within the major, in addition to the approximately 55 credits necessary to complete the Core, and that these numbers sum to nearly the 120 credits necessary to graduate, it is no surprise there has historically been a very close wedding of Honors courses with Core courses, especially considering the $2,169.00 price tag associated this year with each three-credit course. There is simply very little room for electives for students to take. Additionally, with the girth of the Core, there is very little room for professors to create courses specifically for Honors students. They need to ensure the student population at large is being offered enough courses to meet their Core requirements. It is very much "a manpower question on both sides," as Dr. Boudreau phrased it. Because of the bulky core, professors threaten, if
devoting too much attention to Honors courses, not to satisfy their requirements to the general student population, and there may not be much interest anyway, since Honors students’ ability to take Honors courses is often contingent on their status as Core courses. “You simply can’t have that many Honors courses simply because of the numbers issue all the way around,” said Dr. Brian Reed of the English Department, who also advises Quest and heads Mercyhurst’s Center for Teaching Excellence.

One of the ways ‘the numbers issue’ plays out in practice is that it becomes most feasible for those students who can, for lack of a better term, kill three birds with one stone (take a major course that counts additionally for core and Honors credit), to remain in the Honors Program. In a liberal arts college like Mercyhurst, this means that liberal arts students are more likely to remain in the program.

“One of the areas of courses underserved is the sciences,” Boudreau admitted. “There are currently so many students in the department that the professors have a tough time helping their students meet their requirements as is. There’s no way they can teach a course that only two or three majors will be able to take and have enough slots to meet all their requirements. It’s a vicious cycle.”

Boudreau’s statement is true supposing that any department in question would even allow its majors to take an Honors version of the class. One former Honors student, in a major with both a Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degree program, speaking on condition of both personal and program anonymity, said that taking a major course as an Honors course would definitely have helped her be able to stay in the program. However, she stated, there was no way her department would allow anyone within the major to take what would have to be a modified version of the course. It simply would not meet department standards.

The result for students and teachers alike is that Honors courses end up being essentially similar to Core courses for the general student population, leading one to question the purpose of taking Honors courses. One professor with whom I took an Honors course in fall 2007 kicked off the first day of class by commenting (and I’m paraphrasing, but only slightly), “You’ll probably be very bored most of the time in this class, but my department said I’m not allowed to cover any more material than in my other classes.” Is a small class size really all Honors courses have to offer?

Dr. Christine Colin of the History Department taught an Honors version of her World History III course in the winter of 2008. “I didn’t really do that much more pedagogically, but I expected more pedagogically,” she explained. “I expected coming in at a higher level of critical thinking so that we could take discussions further. I switched the theme of my course to nationalism from genocide, and I’ve been able to take some of the things I’ve done in that class and move them into my general sections when I see that they were successful in that kind of atmosphere. That Honors class was great, and I’d love to teach another one again.”

Not all programs offer courses so strikingly similar to the Core versions. The English department routinely offers the highly-sought and much-appreciated Academic Discourse and English Seminar courses as alternatives to College Writing I and II. “English is kind of unique right now,” Boudreau admitted.

That may be changing more and more. All course approvals must routinely go through the Office of Academic Affairs. With the advent of the FSAT program, the OAA has shown increasingly leniency in terms of what they deem eligible to qualify for core credit.

One such example was Dr. Charles Redmond’s planned 3-D Modeling and Design Honors course. “He got approval for the course fairly late in the game, and so he was trying to get it on the books quickly and find a population of students who could pull it off,” Boudreau noted. When Honors students balked at signing up for the course, it had to be scrapped. Whether the issue is purely subject matter or scheduling, the course’s inability to come to fruition perhaps illustrates students’ acceptance of Core rigidity, even if this rigidity means that a number of students are forced to drop out of the program, unable to complete the nine Honors courses in four years, alongside the thesis and portfolio requirements.

Colin expressed sympathy with those students forced to drop out of the program despite good grades and a willingness to stay in the program. “It’s an administrative and not a student problem when a student can’t get the scheduling to work out to meet all the requirements,” she said.

Boudreau himself was forced to drop out of DePauw University’s Honors Program as an undergrad due to conflicting requirements, two majors, and the
need to study abroad. Having attended this fall’s National Collegiate Honors Council forum with Reed, he is able to look upon MCHP with some needed perspective.

“For schools our size, 12-16 graduating students is about normal. There is just a certain level of attrition we have to accept. We need to form the program to benefit our students as much as possible without compromising the standards and best practices of an Honors department,” he said.

Boudreau came away from the Council with a number of ideas how to improve the program and increase retention. He confided the possibility of having two Honors classes in the near future from departments that have not traditionally offered Honors courses, but he was reluctant to name them at this stage in the game.

Further, echoing the sentiments of Honors Council President Nick Gutowski, Boudreau stated, “I would like to change the way people face the Senior Thesis.” The Thesis is often a capstone research project and presentation that causes upperclassmen a great deal of anxiety. “First off, we need students to begin addressing the thesis earlier. We can offer workshops and support groups—ways to take the dread out of the enterprise. Yes, it’s a lot of work, but that doesn’t mean it needs to be a lot of work at once. To complete a senior thesis—it’s something hugely appealing for graduate schools and employers,” he concluded. He suggested Honorizing a class into a Senior Thesis project or expanding a former paper for those struggling to come up with ideas.

Additionally, Boudreau suggested changing in part how the program serves the Mercyhurst community at large. “I’d like to see something to make the tie clearer with the school’s mission statement,” he reported.

One way Boudreau plans on easing the burden for students is by altering a portfolio requirement. Upon graduation, seniors now are expected to have nine portfolio cards filled out, representing at least four of the six categories—activities, alternative term, athletics, leadership, scholarship, service. That will change in the coming years to nine cards, representing at least three of the six categories. Boudreau acknowledged that the athletics and alternative term cards were extremely difficult for some of the student population, especially because intramural athletics was not being counted. “This way, I think we’ve found a much more equitable solution,” he said.

One thing that presumably won’t be changing in the near future is the number of course requirements. It should remain nine Honors courses in four years, with a maximum of four Honorized courses. “Any more Honorized courses would make more than one-half of a student’s Honors courses. That just too fundamentally changes what I think is the Honors experience,” Boudreau said.

Thus concludes a very preliminary re-evaluation of Mercyhurst College’s Honors Program. The idea stemmed from a very personal soul-searching to determine if I was committed to seeing out my senior year at Mercyhurst as an Honors student. My quest resulted in determining that the forces within the Honors program were doing everything they could to offer me a suitable program, one from which I would be proud to graduate.

Yet my queries left some stones not wholly overturned. Due to the whims of departmental scheduling, I was unable to take any Honors courses at all this school year, and it seems as though I won’t be able to take any next fall, either; I still have three to go. The scheduling which many list as the immovable object that prevents them from completing the program is not the Honors program’s fault; it is rather the unwieldy core curriculum and the resistance of certain departments. It will only be with some alterations to the core, in discussion for the past two years, that the Honors department will be able to flourish as it should. This in turn should change the opinion of any balky departments, finally allowing the program to offer a wide variety of courses meeting all students’ and faculty needs. To combine Reed and Boudreau’s sentiments, it’s a numbers cycle. Hopefully with the necessary changes, from forces internal and external, the numbers and the cycle will trend upward.
During my freshman year at Mercyhurst, there have been many challenges thrown at me by way of the Honors Preparation Year requirements: from gaining activity cards to completing service learning and to compiling the final portfolio. Despite its challenges, I feel that I have gained a great deal of experience in completing this first year. I don’t mind that it’s challenging. In fact, I think it should be that way. But are all the challenges of HPY beneficial, or are some unnecessary hoops that we freshman have to jump through?

Although I do feel that the Honors Program as a whole embodies the many attitudes of service and academic excellence expressed in the college mission statement, there are many aspects of the HPY that deter students from sticking with the program itself. There are several majors that have very time-consuming requirements, which make completing the HPY difficult. The limited amount of honors classes offered a term contributed to several HPY students’ decision not to continue with the Honors Program. The stipulation that members can only honorize a limited amount of courses seems to be turning more people away instead of drawing more to the program.

However, I also think that there were improvements made to the Honors Preparation Year greatly helped many, including myself, to understand the program better. The introduction of the upperclassmen mentoring program helped freshmen like me get acclimated to the program and gave us a way to ask questions about program’s sometimes confusing requirements. Other events, especially the meeting that discussed the final portfolio requirements, also helped stem the tide of confusion that came with compiling a portfolio for the first time.

Though the Honors Preparation Year was a little complex at times, overall I felt it was a good experience that has made me better prepared to continue on as an honors student. And more than that, I think the changes that have made so far continue to move the program in the right direction.
John Ladd, a senior English major and Classical Studies minor from Pittsburgh, PA, tells a little about his experiences at Mercyhurst and in the Honors Program. As editor of the Quest since his sophomore year and editor for the Lumen since his junior year, as well as having been frequently involved in theatre on campus both as a performer and stage manager, John has certainly exhibited his literary skills within campus activities.

**What would you say are the best and worst things about the Honors Program?**

The Honors Program has been really useful to me as a way to meet like-minded people. I’ve made some great contacts in the program that have helped me to accomplish a lot in my four years that would have been impossible otherwise. I do wish that the Honors Program would offer more ways to fulfill requirements, particularly course requirements. Honors contracts should be less of an anomaly and more of a standard way of doing business.

**Please describe the highlights of your work as editor for the Quest. What has been the most rewarding, and on the other hand the most challenging?**

When I came to the Quest staff three years ago, it really wasn’t much of anything. Dr. Reed and Rachel Sites had this vision for an online magazine with a wide array of content, and when they asked me to help it seemed like a daunting task. It was a little rocky at first; we had a lot of technical issues with the format change.

My favorite part definitely has been the people I’ve gotten to work with. The weird thing about starting with no staff was that I had to personally recruit everyone who worked on the magazine, and everyone who’s generously volunteered their time has been truly excellent.

Overall, it’s turned out to be something that I’ve really enjoyed. I’ve found that it’s a much more creative pursuit than I first thought, and there’s been plenty of room for my own eccentricities and quirks.

The rest of the staff still ribs me about wanting to do a feature article on the rabbits that overran campus one year.

**What are the different plays and musicals at Mercyhurst with which you have been involved?**

My freshman year, I performed in Macbeth, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and Grease with the Student-Run Musical. As a sophomore I helped to manage Twelfth Night, and similarly in my junior year I worked as stage manager for A Streetcar Named Desire. This year I acted as stage manager for Our Town in the fall as well as for the Student-Run Musical, Sweet Charity.

**What are you plans for after graduation from Mercyhurst?**

I plan to pursue my PhD in English, specifically in Renaissance and Early Modern Literature, and then to become an English professor. My senior thesis this year centers on Milton’s Paradise Lost, which correlates to my specific focus within the area of English studies.

**As a graduating senior, do you have any advice for your underclassmen Honors students or the student body at large?**

That’s really the question, isn’t it? This magazine used to be called The Quest 4, as in the quest for this or that. It’s just the Quest now, because that’s what college is: it’s a journey of seeking, sometimes for something specific, and other times without anything particular in mind. So that’s my advice! Keep journeying, keep looking; maybe you’ll find what you’re looking for, maybe not, but along the way you’ll surely find yourself.
The first extant writing containing the word “commencement” appears in 1250 A.D. in an Old English sermon. By 1587 A.D., it was noted that Oxford used the term “Act” to denote graduation, but at Cambridge the “French” term “Commencement” was used (OED).

Never mind that we all know that “to commence” means “to begin.” The situation of the commencement ceremony at the end of the college experience has somehow linked the word “commencement” to an ending. Thinking of commencement often conjures up images of tearful farewells from friends and those last sad amblings on Mercyhurst’s bucolic grounds. It is about that time for seniors; commencement day is only a few short weeks away. With that in mind, it is certainly worth reviewing “commencement” as a beginning, rather than an ending.

“Commencement” means the time of beginning. Those students leaving Mercyhurst are indeed beginning – being reborn into the wider world, if you will. The anxieties of leaving the place that has been home for the last few years to venture off in search of a job or to a new educational institution go hand in hand with the exhilaration of starting down a new path, making new acquaintances, and seeing new locales. Thus, though Commencement may be the end of the Mercyhurst career, it is just the beginning.

 “[T]o make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.”
-T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets
What is one memory you’ve had of being a member of the Honor’s program that you will always remember?

- I will always remember the fun times I’ve had participating in Christmas on Campus, helping make crafts with the kids. (Katy Sherlack)

Describe one thing that you have enjoyed about being an Honor’s student.

- Always having a comfy couch to crash on (Haley Martens)
- I enjoyed the sense of community with my fellow honors students, both in and out of class. (Sherlack)

Describe one thing that you would like to improve about the Honor’s program.

- I would like to increase the ways in which one can obtain an activity card, since not everyone has the time to play a varsity sport, or travel abroad. (Sherlack)
- More scholarships, more choices for cards (Martens)
- I would like to see more of a variety of Honor’s classes offered so people from all majors can easily be in the program with out any problems. (Stephanie Williams)

How do you feel the Honor’s program has enhanced your college experience?

- The small, seminar-style classes have allowed me to be interested and engaged in my core courses, which otherwise may have become a chore. (Sherlack)
- It has definitely taught me that you work really hard in life and don’t always receive a lot of benefits, but in the end it’s worth it in one way or another, even if it isn’t obvious. (Martens)

What are your plans after graduation? Have they changed since you were a freshman?

- I am starting work on a PhD in Chemistry at Georgetown this fall. I originally planned on entering a Forensic Science Master’s program after graduation. Much has changed since freshman year. (Sherlack)
- I don’t really know what I’m doing...maybe backpack across Europe or something adventurous that isn’t the real world just yet... (Martens)
- World domination. I was born to rule, so no, it hasn’t changed at all. (Williams)
Offered Fall Term Honor Classes

- **Academic Discourse**
  - Monday, Wednesday, Friday
  - 12:30-1:50
  - Dr. McGurk

- **Enduring Questions**
  - Monday, Wednesday
  - 8-9:20
  - Dr. L Brown

- **Statistics**
  - Tuesday, Thursday
  - 2:15-4:10
  - Ms Deshmukh

- **Philosophical Inquiry**
  - Monday, Wednesday, Friday
  - 11-12:20
  - Dr. J Snyder

- **American Government**
  - Monday, Wednesday, Friday
  - 9:30-10:50
  - Dr. Morris

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