



Ada Long

The tension between “urban” and “research” in an urban research university has led to the creation of a small service and community-oriented Honors Program that serves the needs of academically talented students at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Another hallmark of this program is its constantly evolving interdisciplinary curriculum.

Honors as Microcosm of the Urban Research University

The Honors Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) is a reflection of the particular features of the university and the community from which it evolved. Its flexible admissions criteria encourage a heterogeneity that mirrors UAB’s student population; its interdisciplinary curriculum, redesigned each year so that no course is offered more than once, reflects its focus on change more than on tradition; its emphasis on team teaching provides a de-centering of authority in the classroom and a cultural emphasis on multiplicity of perspectives; and its small size, its Honors House, and its extensive network of extracurricular activities inspire a sense of community as much as individual achievement. All these aspects are rooted in the history of Birmingham and the mission of UAB; rather than a “program apart,” it is a microcosm of its institutional and urban context.

Birmingham and UAB

Fifteen years ago, when the University of Alabama at Birmingham Honors Program was founded, the university itself was still very young. Although it had a history as a major medical college and extension center of the University of Alabama, it did not become an independent university until 1967. Despite its youth, the university already had a clearly defined identity that distinguished it from the two other major institutions of higher education in the state, the University of Alabama (UA) and Auburn University.

Most important to its distinctive mission was UAB's urban location. Auburn and UA have determined the character of the small college towns in which they are located; Birmingham, by contrast, has in large part shaped the mission and quality of UAB. Less than ten blocks from the heart of downtown in a city that has the largest metropolitan population in the state (881,000), UAB comprises a second city center, occupying eighty square blocks and sharing a diverse array of neighborhoods at the edges of its campus: a nightclub/tourist center to its east, residential neighborhoods to the south and west, and, to the north, an area that once consisted of sprawling urban blight but is now fast becoming a vital commercial and residential area that connects UAB to the heart of the city.

Within two decades of its founding, UAB became the major employer not just in the city but in the state. Centered around its prominent medical center, it has an annual budget of more than a billion dollars, a full-time faculty of 1,672 (with the majority in health-related fields), and a student population of 16,165 (10,692 undergraduates). It is now the only Carnegie Research I university in the state of Alabama.

The university's extraordinarily rapid growth has created a special reciprocity in its relationship with the city of Birmingham, which has also undergone rapid and dramatic change. What used to be a steel town is now an exemplar of the "New South." The racial tensions that originated in the segregated housing and working conditions of the steel era and that became internationally visible in the 60s have undergone a major transformation. The city's mayor, police chief, and majority of elected officials are now African American. Racial problems here, as elsewhere, are still very serious, but Birmingham's history helps to keep the city honest; the images of police dogs and fire hoses are still vivid enough to prohibit either apathy or unwarranted back-patting.

Birmingham and UAB have a relationship of reciprocal influence that, for the most part, is mutually beneficial. UAB's mission has always included responsibility to its urban history and setting, and, despite occasional pressures to the contrary, the university has generally acknowledged and acted on its mission not only through outreach programs but by serving the nontraditional as well as traditional student populations within the metropolitan area. Among its undergraduates, 93.9% are from Alabama and 76.4% from the metropolitan area, whereas Auburn and the University of Alabama have much larger out-of-state representation. Only 13.3% of UAB students live on campus. The average age of students is 25; 24.9% of the students are African-American; and the wide range of programs and disciplines is adapted to the diverse needs of local students.

While UAB is an urban university, it is also a research university with numerous internationally recognized academic and medical programs and over 207 million dollars of external grant support. Some faculty and administrators have considered UAB's commitment to excellence in research incompatible with its urban commitment to access, pushing for higher admissions criteria and for cutbacks in developmental courses and support services for underprepared students. Consequently, the phrase "urban research university" engendered considerable discussion in the latest formulation of UAB's mission statement, with "urban" advocates occasionally in conflict with "re-

search” advocates. A broad consensus emerged that the two terms together—not just despite but because of the tension that arises from their co-adjectival positioning—are what make UAB exciting.

The University Honors Program

The creative tension between *urban* and *research* in UAB’s mission statement is the inspiration for the character of the university honors program, which has incorporated UAB’s most exciting, and most endangered, features: its genuine heterogeneity, its lack of tradition, its openness to new ideas, and its combined commitment to the local and global. These features are endangered because, if called by different names such as “insecurity,” “fragmentation,” or “inconsistent standards,” they would become weaknesses to many faculty and administrators. The struggle to provide positive or negative names to UAB’s special qualities is part of the tension between urban and research; the challenge for the honors program was (and is) to keep the two together in a way that preserves the tension and excites the students to do their best. Our goals have been to provide access to a diverse group of students, including some who are underprepared but highly motivated; to enable the privileged and the underprivileged to learn from each other, both in and out of class; and to demand excellence of all students while providing the support services necessary to attain it. The program’s success in achieving excellence while maintaining access has affirmed the viability of an “urban research university.”

Although we gathered information from hundreds of honors programs while conceiving ours, the urban research rubric resulted in a program unlike any other that we explored. The unique features of our program, such as our admissions policy, our small size, our interdisciplinary curriculum, our location in the Honors House, and our extracurricular/social-service component, were direct results of the unique character of UAB and its creative tension between urban and research.

Admissions Policy

The most efficient and labor-saving criteria for admitting students to an honors program are minimum grades and national test scores. The liabilities of such minimums are (1) implied programmatic emphasis on quantitative measurement; (2) exclusion of students who are older and did poorly long ago in high school (or college) or who didn’t take national tests; (3) exclusion of students who come from poor urban or rural school districts, and thus (4) exclusion of African American students. As a rule, efficiency limits diversity.

Because our honors program was designed to be a microcosm of UAB and representative of its urban context, we chose a labor-intensive but much more interesting strategy for selecting students. The multiple criteria for admission include GPA, ACT, or SAT scores, at least two letters of recommendation, a personal essay, and a half-hour interview by two members of the Honors Council; the interview has been the single most important factor in admissions. Our multiple criteria, especially the interview, allow us to consider the whole person in our admissions process and also allow candidates to get a close look at us.

As a result of flexible admissions criteria, active recruitment efforts, and a programmatic emphasis on diversity and individuality, we have been able to maintain a high level of diversity in age, race, background, discipline, and interests. Currently the percentage of African Americans in the program is 23% (2% less than in the university as a whole), and we have 15% Asian American students whereas the university has only 3%. About 9% are over 25 (the average age of UAB students is 25).

We have been able to reconcile urban with research by requiring high standards of scholarship for graduation, not necessarily for admission. Currently the average ACT score of students in the program is 28, and the average GPA is 3.27. The average GPA of the 84 students who have an ACT of 26 and above is 3.45, and the average GPA of the 41 students with 25 and below is 3.11. (Another 26 students did not take the ACT or their scores are no longer valid.) There is, predictably, a difference between the group GPAs based on ACT, but it is not as great as many people would imagine, and for several years has shown a difference as low as .20. For individuals, the ACT is a very poor predictor indeed. One of our students with an ACT score of 18, for instance, got an NSF Fellowship for graduate school, and students with 34 and above have occasionally flunked out.

Through our admissions policy, we feel we have been able to maintain high standards for our students in line with the mission of a research university while also honoring our urban goals. The benefit to all our students of working in a diverse academic community is immeasurable.

Program Size and Scale

All of us who work on large metropolitan campuses know that a diverse student body does not necessarily translate into cultural awareness; different ethnic groups tend to hang out on different parts of the campus and can coexist without ever getting to know each other.

In order to make diversity something that matters, the UAB honors program is limited to a size that encourages—indeed necessitates—daily interaction among all of its students. Our 1996-97 enrollment was 151 students, up from 120 in 1994-95 and rising to 200 by 1998-99.

It hasn't been easy to maintain a small size. The "bigger is better" philosophy tends to predominate in honors education, sometimes even among honors administrators, but especially among university administrators who see honors programs as a way to recruit more gifted students to their campuses and thus raise the academic level of the student body. Unfortunately, although increased admission of high-achieving students raises the status of a university, it does not necessarily raise the quality of that university's education. The quality of academic programs provided for gifted students requires increased instructional and administrative resources. More importantly, communities must be fostered that allow and encourage high-achieving students to become resources for the rest of the student population; otherwise, the quality of an institution's best students does not translate into quality of education at the institution.

Two years ago we bowed to the pressure of increasing numbers mandated by the central administration at that time and increased our annual admissions to the honors program from 30 to 50 students. The advantage of the increase in service to more students may be counterbalanced by a diminution in the quality of attention and education within the program, the primary negative impact being a more diffuse sense of a community. The only indication so far that the sense of community may have diminished is that a smaller percentage of students is attending honors-sponsored events, and students seem a bit more inclined to seek out their own kind rather than mixing with everyone in the program. Nevertheless, it is still possible for the faculty and administration of the program to know the students, for the students to know each other, and for group dynamics to necessitate continuous discussion across cultural, racial, and disciplinary boundaries.

In addition to expanding the university honors program in order to accommodate more students, we have also multiplied the kinds of honors options at UAB, and this has become a significant advantage to the quality and diversity of our educational offerings. Students who want to concentrate their energies now have the opportunity to focus on research in a single discipline; special courses and mentoring relationships have been designed to meet these students' disciplinary interests. In the past two years we have created ten new departmental honors programs, bringing the total to thirteen, so that small disciplinary communities can serve as either additions to or substitutes for the interdisciplinary university honors program. We have also created three sequences of three one-hour honors seminars for incoming students who are not in the honors program but desire an honors experience at a lower level without the major commitment of the program. Students participating in any of these options are invited to participate in the 50+ extracurricular events sponsored each year by the program. With these new options, we can expand the number of honors students without limits while maintaining a 200-student maximum in the university honors program. Expanding options in this way is consistent with our mission reflecting and serving a diverse metropolitan area by offering several options: the specialized research tracks of departmental honors programs; the broadly interdisciplinary university honors program; or a combination of the two. In this way we can both serve more honors students and address their different educational, personal, and career needs.

Interdisciplinary Curriculum

Last year, a group of twenty-five honors students who were broadly representative of the diverse ages, ethnicities, and disciplines in the honors program came together with the program's administration to update the mission and goals of the program. Having experienced the excitement of a truly diverse program, the students are quicker and more unanimous than faculty in appreciating the combination of access and excellence in our urban and research missions. In annual evaluations of the program, both current students and alumni consistently list diversity first in what they value about their honors experience at UAB. In articulating goals for the interdisciplinary curriculum, students stressed the importance of multiple perspectives and out-of-

class experiences as well as innovation and excellence. We incorporated this combination in the revised goals they helped to articulate for the interdisciplinary curriculum:

- replace the standard core curriculum with team-taught interdisciplinary course work that provides a similar background and set of skills as the regular core, but that also challenges students to discover connections among the many disciplines in the core;
- encourage students to be active participants in their education and to develop passion as well as skill in scholarship;
- create a common intellectual background for all the students in the program while also encouraging disagreement so that the multiple perspectives of both students and faculty stimulate independent thought;
- ensure vital, innovative, cutting-edge ideas and methodologies by not teaching any course more than once;
- involve as many faculty from the university as possible in order to energize and enrich their regular pedagogy;
- use all the resources of a major research university;
- create an intellectual community among the faculty of this large university as well as a community among and between students and faculty;
- create an environment in which the learning takes place out of the classroom as much as, or more than, in class; and
- create continuous new opportunities to use and to serve the resources of a large urban center.

Thirty-three hours of honors course work (of the 128 hours required for graduation) are required for completion of the university honors program, and students now have three options for completing them. (Option 1 was the only one available until two years ago, but now students can choose to allot more time to the small-group experience of honors seminars [Option 2] or to disciplinary research projects [Option 3]):

Option 1:	Three 9-hour interdisciplinary honors courses	[27 hours]
	Two 3-hour honors seminars	[6 hours]
Option 2:	Two 9-hour interdisciplinary honors courses	[18 hours]
	Five 3-hour honors seminars	[15 hours]
Option 3:	Two 9-hour interdisciplinary honors courses	[18 hours]
	Two 3-hour honors seminars	[6 hours]
	9 hours of disciplinary honors research	[9 hours]

In addition, all students are required to fulfill the core curriculum requirements in math and computer science, which are not specifically covered in the honors program.

Only one intensive nine-hour course is taught each year during the fall, and all students in the program take this course during their first two fall terms at UAB, so

that they have a common body of knowledge with their own peer group and also with students in both the years ahead and behind them.

The nine-hour courses are team-taught by six faculty members, at least one of whom usually comes from another university or from the community, a format that originated in an NEH-funded sequence of team-taught humanities courses at UAB in the early 1980s. Faculty outside the humanities, (e.g., in fields like mathematics, medicine, and engineering) heard about these courses and wanted to participate, so that the idea was transplanted to the honors program and broadened to include all disciplines at UAB. As different faculty teams worked together over the years, they often discovered a need for areas of expertise not represented at UAB, such as theology, urban planning, or applied technologies, and so invited faculty from the community or from other campuses, including Princeton, the University of Toronto, and Catholic University, to participate. Team members have now represented virtually all UAB disciplines as well as many others not available here. Because faculty enjoy these courses as much as the students, we have no problem recruiting the best, and faculty are often transformed by the experience of team teaching, especially by the opportunity to be a student again and to learn as much as they teach.

The nine-hour interdisciplinary courses have had such titles as "The Nature/Nurture Debate," "Science and Religion on a Pale Blue Dot," and "Creativity in the Arts and Sciences." In last year's course on "Ethics," for instance, the faculty were from philosophy, psychology, biochemistry, English, and anthropology, as well as from the community, (e.g., the founding Executive Director of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute). All faculty are present for all class sessions, and each directs an out-of-class series of community experiences. Last year, for example, these experiences included explorations of Alabama jails and prisons; health clinics; churches, temples, and mosques; toxic waste dumps and local lakes and rivers; zoos, animal labs, and animal shelters; and day care facilities and children's clinics. The nine-hour courses all stress basic skills, big ideas, interactive learning, independent research, and a broad range of connections between disciplines.

The Honors Seminars, limited to 16 students, are sometimes team-taught but more often singly; these also stress the interdisciplinary contexts and connections of the material but are more focused on in-depth scholarship, especially the understanding and practice of research methodologies as they are employed by professionals within a field. Honors Seminar topics have included "Tuberculosis as Epidemic and Symbol," "The Rise and Decline of Black-Owned Businesses during the 20th Century," "Terminal Illness and Assisted Death in America," "Jazz History," "Philosophy and Physics," "The World of Odysseus," and "Conflicts in Feminism." The seminars are open not only to students in the university honors program but to other students with permission of the instructor and are one way we use to improve educational offerings for all students.

During its fifteen years, over 120 faculty have taught in the program, and at least another 200 have given guest lectures or advised students in research projects. In almost all instances, the people who have taught honors classes have developed close and often permanent relationships with the honors students.

Honors House

Creating a community, especially on a large campus, requires a place for it to meet and connect, and as mentioned earlier, it is not unusual for honors programs to have special spaces designated for their use.

The UAB Honors House is an ideal center of community: it is an old church (built in 1901), centrally located on the UAB campus between the performing arts center, the humanities building, and the business/engineering complex, and is the site of all honors classes, the administrative offices, and most extracurricular activities as well as daily study, recreation, and discussion among students. In the same way that UAB students can go to the gym for a game of pick-up basketball, they can come to the honors house for spontaneous conversation, very often centered on the topics discussed in honors classes.

In addition to classrooms and offices, the honors house contains computer facilities, a copy machine, study areas, a kitchen, stereo, pool table, ping-pong table and a wonderful front stoop that continues a neighborhood tradition: when UAB underwent its rapid expansion in the 1960s and 70s, it displaced the community that once lived here, and the honors house is one of only two or three buildings that remain from the former neighborhood, connecting our program to the community that built and maintained it as people who were married in the church drop by to visit, and others come to see a place where Martin Luther King, Jr. once spoke.

The honors students, who have access to the building at all times, take most of the responsibility for refurbishing and decorating the building, even maintaining an internal corridor where students have left thousands of graffiti over the past fourteen years. The church truly belongs to the honors students, and alumni continue to think of it as their neighborhood and their home, connecting them to each group of new students for whom they serve as academic and professional mentors.

Extracurricular and Social Service Activities

From the beginning, the university honors program described itself as an opportunity to "extend education beyond the classroom to a way of life," indicating our desire not only to promote education over time through life-long learning but also over space through interacting with our urban and metropolitan community. While the curriculum provides the honors students with a common body of knowledge, the honors house provides a center of intellectual community, the extensive network of extracurricular and social service activities not only bringing others from the campus and community into the honors house but also sending students out into the community to learn and to provide services. These activities are part of our urban mission and they are usually the most memorable educational experiences for our students. Even those who were born and raised in this metropolitan area, whether the suburbs or the inner city, see parts of the community they did not know existed, and they experience cultural contexts that are as unfamiliar to them as foreign countries. Birmingham is a required text for all honors students.

We sponsor more than 50 events at the honors house each year, including a First Thursday lecture series, a film series, a writers' series, and various other symposia and conferences, as well as several purely social events (summer barbecue, end-of-the-term party, Halloween party, and our own graduation ceremony called Honors Day). These events are open to the public, and individual invitations are sent to all high schools and colleges in the metropolitan area as part of our effort to raise the quality of surrounding educational opportunities. Some high schools provide extra credit to students who attend these events, and we have been happy to visit with many high school teachers as well. We have also hosted national figures such as Studs Terkel, Paul Starr, Ellen Goodman, Harlan Ellison, and Gene Roddenberry.

We also have an elaborate committee structure; at least 75% of the honors students are involved with at least one committee, and there are now 14 committees in all. Committees are totally student-initiated and student-run, overseen by a student Steering Committee consisting of the committee chairs. Some of these focus on the internal operations of the program, but the most popular organize public service activities. We have a particularly strong connection to an organization called Bread & Roses, a series of shelters for homeless women and children. For over a decade, our students have hosted monthly birthday parties at the shelters, providing gifts and entertainment for the guests, and they also do manage other projects at the shelters, such as painting, yard work, cooking, and fundraising. Our students have also been group volunteers for Habitat for Humanity, provided tutorial services for the "GED on APT" program, worked for Headstart, served food at soup kitchens, and participated in several of UAB's outreach programs, especially tutoring and mentoring programs in the urban center. In addition, students have served a variety of internships at City Hall, the weather station, and numerous nonprofit agencies.

The National Collegiate Honors Council has provided a number of excellent opportunities for our students, some of whom have never been outside of Alabama and many of whom have never left the Southeast. We take large groups of students to national conferences in places like San Francisco, Chicago, St. Louis, San Antonio, and Los Angeles. More than 160 of our students have made presentations at regional and national conferences, giving them a chance to experience and practice the ritual of conference presentations. Three students have been nationally elected to serve as student representatives on the NCHC executive committee (I am a past president of the organization). Nine of our students, through the NCHC Honors Semesters program, have studied in the Czech Republic, New York, or El Paso; five will be studying in Greece next year. Through these NCHC experiences, our students have had opportunities that are often reserved only for those at much more expensive institutions but also that provide a broad cultural and academic awareness that will be invaluable to the their confidence and success.

The extracurricular components of the program thus also send our students from Birmingham out into the world and to bring the world to our students in Birmingham—by combining the local with the global—which is in line with our mission as an "urban research university."

Honors as Microcosm

The direction our honors program has chosen is to be a microcosm of the larger institution: to incorporate its mission, historical particularities, heterogeneous constituencies, and urban context. Certainly we could have gone another direction. We could have created an alternative rather than microcosmic community and adopted a model for honors that is more typical of honors programs nationally, including minimum test scores, honors sections of regular classes, and greater emphasis on individual achievement than on community development.

The direction we took is a direct response to the particular history and possibilities of Birmingham, Alabama. It is an ongoing experiment in distilling all that is best in this urban community, such as its diversity, self-criticism, rapid change, and the ongoing tension between past and future, local and global. These qualities constitute the center of our research agenda, which is a curriculum and a community that is both of it and apart from it, that participates in it, that examines it and honors it.

Although many components of the UAB honors program might be transportable to other honors programs, the program as a whole could not be transplanted to any other location—for it was designed for this city and for this campus. It is a truly local phenomenon, and perhaps this site-specific quality is an important feature of most metropolitan universities, including their honors programs. Unlike the previous era of land-grant universities, when academic populations, options, expectations, and curricula were fairly standard across the country, the still burgeoning era of metropolitan universities requires sensitivity to the context of the community's history, its demographics, its issues, and its needs.

At the same time, any honors program at any institution needs to demand and provide excellence. Sometimes excellence is measured by the quality of the students coming into the program. At UAB, we measure excellence by the quality of our graduates, and our alumni have proven that while the honors program is site-specific, it is also a point of origin for national and international accomplishment. Of the students who have joined the program, 79% have completed the requirements to graduate "with honors" and 86% have completed their degrees at UAB (more than twice the retention rate of UAB students generally). Among our 225 graduates "with honors" so far, roughly a third have gone to graduate school, a third to professional school (primarily medicine), and a third into business careers. Our alumni are now, for instance, doing anthropological research in Nigeria, redesigning computer hardware in Antarctica, practicing journalism in the Czech Republic, teaching in Japan, Bangladesh, and Australia, directing another honors program in Birmingham, doing post-doctoral work at Cal Tech, and treating patients or teaching future generations of college students all over the country.

Like all honors programs, we offer students entrance into the worlds of academia, business, medicine, law, and virtually all professions. Like most honors programs at metropolitan universities, we provide this opportunity at a cost that is less than a tenth of what they would have to pay at most private colleges and universities. But like no other honors program, we give them an educational experience rooted in a city that has been a battleground for social change in the twentieth century. Through our commitment not only to excellence, but also to access, diversity, social service, and perpetual innovation, we continue the battle.