



How does the JWHC define “Honors” and “Academic Excellence”?

In recent decades collegiate honors education has experienced immense growth. More than 1,000 American colleges and universities have established honors programs in order to attract and retain high-achieving students. Most of these academic communities, however, operate out of generic definitions of “honors” and vague visions of “academic excellence.” On such campuses, honors learning tends to boil down to features such as smaller class sizes, deeper engagement of course content, student research, and faculty-student collaboration.

Several years ago Samuel Schuman, one of the pioneering trailblazers in collegiate honors education, insisted that while every bona-fide honors learning community will offer an enhanced collegiate experience that includes features like those listed above, the ultimate success of honors programs and colleges depends on how clearly and substantively they define the “excellences” they aim to cultivate among their students and how intentionally they pursue such excellences as an opportunity to reinforce and accentuate the distinctives of the broader university’s mission.

In its early years of existence, the John Wesley Honors College faculty determined that, in light of IWU’s mission, the essence of “honors” on campus should be an intentional path of “Christian liberal learning” that equips bright and inquisitive students for a transformative embrace of God’s truth, goodness, and beauty in their everyday lives. The JWHC thus strives to model and enrich IWU’s commitment to a Christian liberal arts education that can nurture lived wisdom.

To envision the “excellences” that this approach to honors education aims to cultivate among our students, we have developed a holistic set of Core Learning Outcomes [link]. These outcomes articulate the heart of our honors community’s academic aspirations, which is to strive for what we call *redemptive excellence*. This kind of academic excellence roots the rigors of study, investigation, critical thinking, creativity, communication, and character development in a Christian vision of human flourishing and pursues such things as a participation in the redemptive work we believe God is carrying out in creation. Our Core Learning Outcomes thus provide a measure for assessing how well we are empowering students to attain a redemptive excellence that can discern and appreciate how to grapple with life’s big questions according to the plot and logic of a Christian narration of reality, how to lean ever more deeply into the liberating goodness of Christ’s redemptive character, and how to embody the sanctifying beauty of God’s reconciling love in the thick of our malformed age.