The sound of muffled voices and laughter filters through the wall of my office as I contemplate the question, “What is the Honors Program?”

Next to my office is the Student Honors Lounge, the gathering place for our students to work on homework, study together, eat their lunches, and build community. While the Honors Program, first and foremost, provides students the opportunity to take dynamic, often interdisciplinary, discussion-based classes in the core curriculum, it is so much more than that.

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By the time a student enrolls in the interdisciplinary American Studies course offered in the Honors Program, they have likely already learned about the defining moments and pivotal events that have shaped the nation from the 18th century through the modern era.

It is unlikely, however, that they ever studied American history through the lens of classic and contemporary American texts – while seated in a circle alongside classmates and instructors, sharing ideas and stepping far outside their normal thought and research process.

That unique style and dual emphasis on the value of history and richness of literature make American Studies as unique and relevant today as when Honors Program founder John Britt started the class 42 years ago. Since 2014, the course has been taught by Dr. Andy Miller and Dr. Portia Hopkins.

"I get excited coming up with new ways to teach and angles that put a new spin on familiar literature and historic material. The need for critical thinking extends to students and the instructors," said Miller, a Lee College Honors Program alumnus who went on to earn a doctorate in English.

"We complicate and problematize until students slow down their thinking and understand what it really means to answer a question. That’s what makes American Studies distinctly ‘Honors.’"

As a believer in the importance of students taking on a share of the responsibility for the success and depth of their education, Hopkins most enjoys seeing how students grow intellectually and develop the awareness that history is constantly being built upon and happening around them.

"Honors students are unique," said Hopkins, who revived the Model United Nations and advises the Webb Historical Society while completing a dissertation on women organizers and grassroots historic preservation for a doctorate in American Studies. "For these students, being ‘Honors’ means taking on a challenge and facing it with full faith instead of fear. They’re coming into a community college that also wants them to succeed."

Within our classes, the Honors Program challenges students to consider and interrogate new perspectives; we also provide field experiences to museums and the theater, service activities, cultural events, university campus tours, leadership opportunities, and academic conferences. What becomes most life-changing to students, however, is the opportunity they have to build relationships with faculty and other honors students who are as intellectually curious as they are. The Honors Program provides students a safe place to explore ideas as they shape their identity and find their place in the world.

Likewise, together, we help write the story of academic success at Lee College. Our students present their outstanding work beside students from universities across the country at conferences such as the National Undergraduate Literature Conference, the National Conference on Undergraduate Research, the Great Plains Honors Council Conference, and the National Collegiate Honors Council Conference. Our students have won many major scholarships such as the Jack Kent Cooke award and have attained spots on the All-USA Community College Academic Team. The academic, service, and leadership opportunities we provide help students fulfill their goals, academically and financially, as they prepare for transfer to four-year universities.

While all of this describes what the Honors Program is, the most profound statement of what it does comes from the voices of our students, those incredible people talking and laughing on the other side of my office wall. One student once told me, “In the Honors Program, I’ve made friends who encourage me to take a step out and try and be the person I know I am but don’t have the courage to be on my own.” Another once said, “When I’m with other honors students, I can be myself.”

The Honors Program requires that students work hard, but it is a rewarding and empowering opportunity unlike any other.

- Georgeann Ward, Honors Program Coordinator
Joy and Learning in Nature: Students Give Back At Exploration Green

Students in the Honors Program brought their classroom exploration into the real world this year by volunteering at the Exploration Green tree nursery in Clear Lake – and, in the process, inspired future generations of scholars to commit their own time to service in the great outdoors.

The student volunteers who set the pace were part of The Human Condition, a seminar-style Honors course taught by instructors Georgeann Ward and Jerry Hamby that combines the disciplines of English and the Humanities and emphasizes open discussion, bold questions and critical thinking. Ward and Hamby introduced a unit focused on humanity’s relationship with nature, making time spent at the tree nursery more meaningful. Completing community service projects also makes Honors students even stronger candidates for transfer to four-year institutions.

Additionally, the IMPACT Spanish Club began volunteering at the tree nursery at the urging of one of the members, who had become involved while taking The Human Condition course. While many of their peers snuggled under the covers on Saturday mornings, dozens of volunteers from the Spanish Club were already digging their hands in the dirt at Exploration Green. IMPACT students can earn a high-school diploma and up to 60 hours of college credit simultaneously through a partnership between Lee College and the Goose Creek Consolidated Independent School District; they are welcome to join the Honors Program if qualified.

The students’ decision to give their time to Exploration Green struck a chord with Hamby, a certified Texas Master Naturalist who has completed 100 hours of formal training and who supervises their work at the tree nursery. He hopes they gained a greater sense of purpose and stronger awareness of the power of place through their service.

“Education isn’t about just sitting in a classroom,” Hamby said. “Real learning takes place beyond those walls.”

Terry Foundation Offers Scholarships To University Transfers

Outstanding Lee College students who want to continue their education at one of nearly a dozen Texas institutions can get significant financial support for tuition and other costs of attendance through the Terry Foundation, a Houston-based philanthropic organization that offers scholarships for transfer and non-traditional students to attend affiliated in-state public colleges and universities.

Previous recipients of the Terry Foundation Transfer Scholarship at Lee College include Honors Program alumna Cheryl Lauersdorf Ross, a member of the inaugural class of Terry Scholars at the University of Houston. Scholarship applicants must meet several requirements to be eligible and are evaluated based on leadership potential and character, scholastic record and ability, and financial need.

“The Terry Foundation changes lives,” said Ross, who was also accepted into the Honors College at UH. “I am so very blessed to be part of the Terry Family.”
After earning distinction among their peers with stellar performances in the classroom, on the basketball and volleyball courts and in the community, the best and brightest students are recognized at Honors Day: the annual, campus-wide celebration of academic and extracurricular excellence organized by the Honors Program.

Flanked by faculty in academic regalia and applauded by administrators, guests, and loved ones, more than 100 students walk across the Performing Arts Center stage – one by one – to receive certificates, medallions, stoles and plaques in honor of their work.

Awards are given to top students in each degree program; Honors Program completers; students chosen to present at regional, state and national research conferences; students recognized by the Coca-Cola Community College Academic Team, Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society and other organizations; participants in Model United Nations, the Walter Prescott Webb Historical Society and Mendoza Debate Society; service-learning leaders; and standout athletes.

Every student’s moment in the spotlight is a shining example for those who come behind, said President Dr. Dennis Brown. “These students haven’t just done what they needed to do; they’ve done much more than required,” Brown said. “We thank them for selecting our college and for dedicating their time and talents to be successful. Their achievements here will follow them wherever the future leads.”

The highest praise at Honors Day is reserved for those chosen for induction into the Lee College Hall of Fame. To be eligible, students must demonstrate scholarship, leadership and service to the community and the college, while maintaining a minimum 2.5 GPA and completing at least 48 credit hours.

Lee College Honors Program students Kyle Diamond, Jeremy Gallagher and Hunter McHugh were inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2016. Alumni Cody Bijou, Reagan Dobbs, Rachelle Dodson and Impact senior Siavash Zamirpour made up the Class of 2015.

As part of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, students at two-year colleges around the world commit themselves to academic excellence and growth as citizens and scholars.

“Membership is a way to get that deeper education; to learn more about how the world works through different perspectives and ideologies,” said Sarah Tidwell, adviser of the Zeta Nu chapter at Lee College, which was honored as a Top 100 Chapter in 2015 and had two members – Erin Cravey and Sheila Moore – inducted this year into the District IV Hall of Fame.

“We come together to explore leadership and service opportunities, have fun and explore scholarship together through the Honors in Action project.”

Between achieving success in the classroom and mentoring students at the IMPACT Early College High School, Phi Theta Kappa students also supported peer organizations at events like the International Public Debate Association National Championship Tournament at Lee College and shined a spotlight on a pervasive but seldom discussed problem in the Houston region: human trafficking.

The Zeta Nu chapter worked with the United Against Human Trafficking organization based in Houston to host “Human Trafficking 101,” a workshop to raise awareness about the resources available to victims and ways to recognize and fight against forced labor and sexual exploitation. Phi Theta Kappa students also encouraged others to pledge to combat human trafficking with the “Flight to Freedom” display at Spring Fling, and completed the Red Sand Project activist art installation that calls to mind members of the marginalized communities that are often targeted for enslavement.

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