This is my third annual State of the University Honors College (UHC) address. The goal of these talks is to inform everyone in the Pitt community about what’s happening in the UHC, what’s been happening, and what we plan to do. My talk is organized around the stated mission of the UHC, which is to provide enriched educational opportunities to undergraduate students at Pitt. Of course, that mission is consistent with one of the general goals of the University, which is to provide an excellent education to its students.

But how do you achieve excellence in education? It’s a complicated business, but I believe there are at least six factors of significance. This morning I will present them one by one and make a few comments about each in turn.

To begin, I cannot talk about excellent college education without including excellent courses. All schools with honors programs have *honors courses*. Some schools require students to take a certain number of honors courses per year, or a certain total number by the time that students graduate, in order for them to maintain their membership in the honors program. As you know, the Pitt Honors College is not a membership organization; no student is a member, and there are no requirements to take honors courses. Students can take honors courses or not as they wish. They can take this course but not that course, in this term but not in that term.

At Pitt, there are now 80-100 honors courses taught per academic year. However, the distribution of these courses is not uniform; some departments have multiple honors courses, some have none. Honors courses at Pitt tend to be seminars containing 15-20 students, although there are seminars with smaller enrollments as well as lecture classes with more than 50 students. In general, honors courses are designed to provide more coverage of a given subject; more depth, more breadth, and more critical evaluation. All of them are challenging courses in which students have to work harder than they do in regular classes. They have to read more, they have to write more, and they have to talk more in class. If a group of students is asked whether they want to work harder in a course, a good number of students will say they would be willing to work harder provided they learn more. Faculty members also work harder in these courses because they have a room full of inquisitive students who are eager to learn. I think of it as an ideal educational environment and therefore it is great fun for students and for instructors alike. We encourage a track of honors courses through each major, so students can take one honors course after another as they pursue their education.

A very large portion of our incoming undergraduate students state that they hope to have a career in the health professions after they graduate from college. No doubt they were attracted to Pitt by our large and successful biomedical community. Although there is no “pre-med” major at Pitt, the UHC has begun working with the Dietrich School of Arts & Sciences to create a pre-med honors track of courses. Note that this honors track will not focus only on courses in biology, chemistry, and the natural sciences, which have been among the traditional
requirements for admission into medical and dental schools. The honors track also will include courses in the social sciences and humanities.

The 80-100 honors courses offered each year is a good number, but our present goal is to have more departments teach more honors courses. Beginning this month, the new Assistant Dean of the UHC, Gordon Mitchell, will be visiting departments to encourage the development of honors courses. Note that it is easy to add honors courses to the curriculum because they do not have to be offered separately from the regular section of the course. They could be supplements to the regular section. For example, for more than 25 years I have taught a 3-credit introductory course in Neuroscience with 125 or 150 students in it, and in addition I met with a subset of 19 students weekly for an hour and a quarter in a 1-credit seminar in which we discussed material I did not have time to present in the lectures; thus, those 19 students registered for a 4-credit honors course. In addition, many departments have advanced electives that are de facto honors courses without having that designation. In fact, I taught such a course throughout my first 40 years at Pitt. It began as a graduate course to which I added selected undergraduate students, and over the years it gradually attracted more and more undergraduates until it became an undergraduate course with selected graduate students. I never thought to have it identified as an honors course but that’s what it was. I also never thought to identify the graduate course as an honors course for undergraduate students. Thus, to department chairs I say that if you also have never thought of such things, we encourage you to think about them as you plan your undergraduate curriculum for next year.

A second variable essential to an enriched education is to create a community of excellent students who interact with each other and learn from each other. Although the UHC at Pitt does not use membership to define a community of honors students, we do other things to create such a community. I’ll mention two.

It is well known that the UHC provides an exceptional research experience in its Summer Brackenridge Research Program. For 12 weeks, from the second week of May through the first week of August, about 50 students drawn from multiple departments and majors across the campus work on mentor-guided research projects for six days each week, and on the seventh day they congregate and present their projects to each other. From this exercise the students learn to appreciate the great variety of research interests of their peers. But that’s not all they learn. Because of the great diversity of student backgrounds and expertise, the students must communicate about their projects in plain language, without jargon, and they learn to do so. They also learn how to listen to such presentations, asking questions about anything they do not understand. In other words, most of them learn to become very good at communicating. Parenthetically, I want to mention that in recent years the Brackenridge Program has been extended from the Summer to the Fall and Spring semesters, so that these educational benefits are available to students throughout the academic year.
It is important to note that in the Brackenridge Program we try to have a mix of students that is roughly one-third each of students with research interests in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences. However, as mentioned, the University attracts a disproportionately large number of undergraduate students with interests in the biomedical sciences, which heavily skews the applicant pool in that direction. Thus, this coming summer we hope to initiate a second research program for undergraduate students that focuses on the Health Sciences and is modeled after the Brackenridge Program. Because the Health Sciences are quite broad, ranging from cancer biology to public health and psychiatry, we are confident that the new program will resemble the traditional Brackenridge experience in breadth and disciplinary diversity.

The other important program we use to build a community of honors students at Pitt is through honors housing. When the UHC was founded in 1987, honors housing did not exist. However, as the community of honors students grew the UHC was given a building that housed ~100 students; that was in 1999. Today, honors housing is provided by three residence halls that accommodate 720 students, one building for freshmen and two for sophomores and juniors. Such buildings used to be called “dormitories” because students slept there. Now the buildings are called “residence halls” because it is recognized that students do more than sleep there, they live there. I would characterize the students who elect honors housing as serious students; they are serious about themselves, serious about getting an education in college, and serious about their plans for what they will do after college. They work hard, they do what they should do in order to succeed, and they want to be around other serious and successful students. In addition to sharing living space these students study together, they learn from one another, and they share ideas and experiences. I might add the UHC provides a program of activities that further enhances their experience. In short, these residence halls have become one of the important settings in which honors students on campus bond to form an honors community.

Other important features of an enriched education are the standards and values that are promoted. For example, one of the goals of the UHC is to promote academic attainment. Academic attainment is the conspicuous product of the motivation, discipline, and talent that are required to achieve success in the classroom. But the goal for students is not simply to get A’s in their courses. I teach a lot of pre-medical students in my Neuroscience course. I point out that generally students can get A’s in their courses if they get grades of 85 or 90% on exams. However, it is not reassuring to patients to be told by their physicians that they know 85-90% of the relevant material. The patients want physicians to know all of it, and with good reason. In other words, rather than trying to get an A in a course I believe the students should instead set a personal goal of mastering all the material. And the same may be said to students pursuing any profession, not just medicine.

But academic achievement is not all that the UHC values. We also encourage intellectual curiosity, the great desire of students to learn and understand all the subjects of interest to them, which leads to unusual depth and breadth of education. And we promote a third value: we want students to develop and maintain a social consciousness. We want them to recognize that they
are members of a community and have responsibilities to participate in the community and support its goals. The community can be defined by the student as on-campus or off-campus, and this social consciousness may take the form of bringing their academic skills and interests into the community (e.g., tutoring peers on campus or children in local schools). Our Community Engagement advisor links students with faculty mentors who have similar interests and with community settings that have specific needs. In addition, she provides fellowships to students who do research in the community and she provides development grants to faculty who incorporate service learning in their courses.

In the context of discussing the students’ responsibilities to the surrounding community, I want to acknowledge the general responsibilities of the UHC to the community both on- and off-campus. Last year we initiated a series of public lectures on climate change because we thought it was a most important matter that deserved serious consideration by everyone. We plan to provide a lecture on this topic every semester for the foreseeable future. And each year we help to support the Pittsburgh Arts & Lectures series, which brings prominent writers to Pittsburgh for a series of ten public lectures throughout the academic year. And two or three times annually we co-sponsor the American Experience lecture series with the Dick Thornburgh Forum for Law and Public Policy, which brings an extraordinary roster of statesmen and civic leaders and others to campus. And each spring we sponsor a panel of journalists discussing an issue of great interest. Last year the focus was on the Watergate scandal from 40 years ago, and this spring the focus will be the end of the American troop involvement in the Viet Nam war. And last fall we helped to support the Anthropology Department’s series of three lectures on human evolution. In each case undergraduate students are given special access to the speakers, but our general goal is to try to promote the informed citizenry that Thomas Jefferson said was vital to the preservation of the American democracy.

Promotion of these values also provides the impetus of the Award we began last year, named in honor of G Alec Stewart, the founding Dean of the UHC. This award recognizes undergraduate students in their junior year in college who have three distinctive traits – academic attainment, intellectual curiosity, and a social consciousness. Which brings me to my fourth point: the Stewart Award was developed not only because it provided an opportunity for us to honor Dean Stewart and the four students who in our opinion best exemplify his values and our values, the Award also was developed in order to recognize and draw public attention to those values.

There is another award we have just developed that accomplishes the same general goal while recognizing and rewarding outstanding academic attainment. Earlier this week we began a program of UHC Scholarships. Thus, beginning this semester we will provide $2000 per year in scholarships to selected undergraduate students who do not already receive scholarship aid from the University’s Office of Admission and Financial Aid. We are targeting approximately forty high-achieving students who have some connection with the UHC. They may be “late bloomers”; that is, students whose credentials in high school did not predict high achievement in college. Or they may be transfer students, who are not eligible for scholarship aid from the
Office of Admissions. Or they may be students who applied too late for consideration by the Office of Admissions for scholarship aid. I should note that the funds supporting these scholarships are derived from donations to the UHC and were intended to be used for this purpose. It is our hope that the success of our scholarship program will encourage more donations, which will enable us to provide more scholarships.

The selection of students who receive these scholarships will be made by the Faculty Advisory Committee of the UHC, which brings me to my next general point. Education at Pitt does not occur only in classrooms and residence halls; it also occurs in laboratories, libraries, and studios. And the quality of a school is not measured only by the quality of its students but also by the quality of its faculty; more specifically, by the quality of the research and scholarship they produce as well as the quality of instruction and mentoring they provide to students and the quality of citizenship and collegiality they provide to the entire institution.

The focus of the UHC is the education of undergraduate students at Pitt. But undergraduate students need mentoring; that is, they need assistance and nurturing. In other words, they need faculty to guide them and encourage them while educating them. I mentioned that the UHC does not have students; we also do not have faculty. We rely on the voluntary contribution of faculty who provide instruction in classrooms and/or in mentored projects in research and scholarship, and who serve on various UHC committees. As mentioned, these committees include selection of students who are awarded UHC Scholarships, and selection of students who receive the Stewart Award. We also have two faculty advisory committees that provide perspective on what we are doing and what we are planning to do. I might mention in this regard a new advisory committee – the Board of Visitors – that will meet for first time on March 1st. This Board is composed of alumni of Pitt who have a special connection with the UHC.

In the coming years we want to increase faculty involvement in the UHC. Although some faculty members do not want to spend time with undergraduate students, a great many faculty members do. We want such faculty to feel connected to the UHC, to recognize that they are part of a community of faculty whose own values are consistent with our educational mission. Towards that goal, we have initiated a lecture series in which faculty present their research and scholarship to honors students and to the community generally; we have been pleased but not surprised that it has been very well-attended. We also have initiated a more informal series of presentations by faculty (called the “faculty coffeehouse”), which enable them to chat with smaller groups of students about issues not related to their research and scholarship. My point here is that the UHC does not function solely for the benefit of undergraduate students who want the opportunities we provide. It’s also of potential benefit to the faculty members who share our values and see themselves as educators and not just as scientists or scholars.

The five variables just mentioned enrich the educational experience of students as a consequence of planning, of utilizing resources appropriately, of judgment in recognizing opportunities when they appear, of assessing outcomes, and of making decisions and taking actions. I’ve just given
part of the description of the leadership provided by department chairs and center directors on campus, and the deans and the Provost and the Chancellor, all of whom are committed to the goal of providing excellence in education at Pitt. We are supported in this regard by our assistants and associates. With regard to the UHC, Peter Koehler, former Dean of Arts & Sciences, came out of retirement two years ago and he has been a most valuable colleague in the UHC. As mentioned, Gordon Mitchell has just become the first Assistant Dean of the UHC. In addition, the UHC receives crucial assistance from a wonderful staff, each of whom is notably competent, committed, and collegial. One of their main functions is to advise undergraduate students, and so I want to say something about advising.

When I was an undergraduate student at the University of Chicago in the 1950’s, there were no advisors. I guess the school thought that if you were smart enough to go to college, you also were smart enough to figure out what courses to take and what subjects to pursue. Nowadays, at Pitt and other schools, many advisors are available to help students navigate their college experience. Every school at Pitt has advisors, and each departmental major has advisors. The UHC has a group of advisors too, and we provide multiple types of advising. Some of our advisors focus on preparing students to compete for prestigious national awards such as the Rhodes, Marshall, and Churchill Scholarships. Another group of advisors focuses on preparing students for careers in the health professions. A third group provides what we call “supplemental advising” for students with multiple majors. About 25% of Pitt undergraduate students in Arts and Sciences have two or more majors, and in addition to those students meeting separately with departmental advisors who are expert in each major, they meet with UHC advisors to learn how to produce an integrated curriculum of courses and experiences. And, as mentioned, we have a Community Engagement advisor who helps students who want to do academic work within the local community.

We also advise undergraduate students who wish to pursue the Bachelor of Philosophy (BPhil) degree. Many honors colleges in this country are really honors programs and are not colleges because they do not offer a degree. In contrast, the UHC at Pitt provides undergraduate students with an opportunity to get extraordinary training in research and scholarship, and certifies that training with the distinctive BPhil degree. In pursuing that degree, students work successfully and independently on a project of research or scholarship in any discipline. They then write a report in the form of a thesis, present their work publicly, and defend their thesis before a faculty committee that includes an outside examiner. These tasks resemble what graduate students typically do in pursuit of a Masters degree, and it is what we ask undergraduate students to do in pursuit of a BPhil degree. There has been a progressive increase in the number of students who obtain a BPhil degree, from less than ten students per year 25 years ago to more than forty students per year in recent years, a number that is still rising. But there may be ten- or twenty-times that number of undergraduate students who engage in independent projects in research and scholarship each year who do not have the time or opportunity to complete a BPhil thesis. For those students, we plan to develop a new certification program in which students pursue their
research and produce a written report but not necessarily in the form of a thesis; moreover, they may not present their work publicly, and there is no outside examiner. In some departments that work would satisfy the requirements for graduation with departmental honors, but regardless we want the students to be certified by the UHC as having accomplished more than the requirements needed for graduation. We would like to call such students “UHC Scholars”. We hope to have this program in place by the end of this semester.

To summarize, in this report I have noted six variables that enable the UHC to provide an enriched education to its undergraduate students: courses, community, standards, recognition, faculty, and leadership. Embedded in this presentation were the values we expect in honors students: academic attainment, intellectual curiosity, and social consciousness. And there were the values we expect in ourselves, including our responsibility to educate future generations of American citizens and the opportunity we provide to all Pitt undergraduate students to obtain an enriched education. My personal mission as Dean has focused on highlighting these values and in maintaining the signature programs of the Honors College while making certain significant changes prompted by the reality that the University of Pittsburgh now attracts many more outstanding students and faculty than it did one generation ago. These changes include more honors courses, more honors housing, new pre-med advising, new community engagement advising, expanded research programs, more faculty involvement, new recognition for substantial student achievement, new scholarships to undergraduate students, and new certification for student research accomplishment.

It was my intention this morning to make clear what features of the UHC have been changing and why. I hope I have succeeded in doing so. Thanks very much for your attention.