

State of the Honors College Address
January 11, 2012

Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Ed Stricker, the Dean of the University Honors College. I want to welcome you to my first public report about the UHC. The first, I might add, of a series of annual reports I plan to give. I have been the Dean for six months now, which is long enough for me to formulate a clear vision of the UHC. My general goal this afternoon is to describe that vision. My specific goals are to explain what the UHC has been doing in recent months and what we aspire to do in the foreseeable future.

I'll begin by giving you some perspective. There are several thousand colleges and universities in this country, and hundreds of them have honors colleges. I have not looked at the web sites of all of them; maybe 50 or 60, all but one east of the Mississippi River, and what I found was interesting. All of the honors colleges are membership organizations, to which students had to submit a separate application for admission. All of the honors colleges have honors courses, and usually those courses represent a sizeable percentage of the courses that honors students have to take in order to stay in the honors program. The general impression I have is that these honors colleges are special enclaves in the school where arguably the best students are sequestered and given special educational opportunities that are not generally available to other students on the same campus. It's as if the students were attending a special school within a school; in fact, in one school the honors college is on a separate campus. It's very different here at Pitt, and I hesitate to add "as you know" because I have learned that not everyone on campus has a clear understanding of what the UHC is like; I think this may be in large part the result of thinking that what is true about honors colleges elsewhere is true here as well.

So here are three general principles to keep in mind as I go through my talk today. First, the UHC at Pitt is not a membership organization. No student here actually is in the Honors College, and no student here actually has been excluded from the Honors College. If that statement is a surprise to you, then I hope it is not an unpleasant surprise. Second, the UHC at Pitt has as its major goal to help the University provide to undergraduate students the best quality education that we can imagine. Let me tell you what I mean by *quality* and by *education*. By quality I mean intellectually stimulating courses and research experiences that inspire and challenge students to think deeply about things they are interested in. And by education I mean learning and understanding not just about the content of various disciplines but also about the student himself/herself, by which I mean what the student likes and what the student is good at. The third principle is that the UHC at Pitt can certify that students have obtained a uniquely outstanding undergraduate education. Certification comes with the conferral of the Bachelor of Philosophy degree, which may be the highest academic achievement an undergraduate student can have at Pitt. Awarding a degree should be what distinguishes an honors college from an honors program (although it seems from what I read that it rarely is), and the BPhil is the degree awarded by the UHC. I will say more about the BPhil later as well as introduce a second certification that the UHC plans to initiate some time during this calendar year.

I now want to provide substance to these principles by describing a variety of programs and activities that the UHC has been sponsoring and plans to sponsor. In discussing them, I will not present all the details about requirements and whatnot although I assure you that there are such

details and they can be obtained either by checking our web site or by asking me or one of our staff about them.

I'll begin with *Honors Courses*. There are about 100 honors courses, at present, at the University of Pittsburgh. They are not taught by UHC faculty members because there is no such thing as UHC faculty members. Instead, they are taught to undergraduate students by faculty members appointed in multiple departments in multiple schools at the University of Pittsburgh. The courses are not uniformly distributed across those schools, nor are they uniformly distributed across departments. Some departments have a lot of them and thereby offer an attractive blueprint for education within the major. That is, students see that they could go from one honors course to another within their major field of interest, if they wanted to do so. Those courses are intended to be harder than regular courses, and students who take them have to do more work. If you ask a group of students the question, "Who wants to take a harder course in which you have to do more work?" not every one of them will raise their hand. But a lot of students will. They want courses that challenge, motivate, and inspire them, and they are willing to work harder so they can learn more in a particular subject. Those courses require more work for the instructor as well, and a different kind of teaching, but I can tell you from experience that they provide wonderful educational experiences for the teachers as well as for the students.

I want to add four footnotes to this description of honors courses. First, because the Honors College at Pitt does not have a fixed curriculum of honors courses, students can take as many or as few honors courses as they want. Second, for the same reason, particularly talented and able students are not consistently sequestered away from regular courses and can enrich them by their presence. Third, although the honors courses contain on average only 18 students, that statistic does not imply that an honors course must contain relatively few students. A stimulating and challenging course may have a lecture format and many dozens of students in the room. And the fourth footnote is that all educational experiences are not provided in the classroom. For example, the UHC sponsors special educational events together with the Dick Thornburgh Forum for Law and Public Policy, events such as the special symposium to be held in March about the uses and risks of nuclear energy. It also sponsors the amazing summer program of undergraduate courses in geology and paleontology, in studio arts, and in western literature that are held on the 6000-acre Spring Creek Preserve in southeastern Wyoming that is owned by the University. Note that some of the products of those courses will be on display for two weeks in this building, beginning at 4 p.m. this afternoon. I will mention other special opportunities in a few minutes.

I now want to turn my attention to the second pillar of the Honors College, which is *advising*. I went to college at the University of Chicago in the 1950's, and at that time colleges did not provide much in the way of organized advising. The schools acted as if their students could figure out on their own what program of courses they should be taking. That's an interesting assumption. It may be valid for some students but certainly it is not true for all students, not then and not now. At Pitt, students have the opportunity to get a lot of advising. Most students seek advice about specific courses to take, about pre-requisites and requirements, and about various educational opportunities. They get that advice from school advisors when they first come to the University, and from departmental advisors once they declare a major. But some students have interests that are not focused on a single departmental discipline, and they need a different kind

of personal advising that complements the advising provided by individual departments and schools. They need what I call “supplemental advising” about their complex program of multiple majors, and that advising is provided by the UHC. Supplemental advising also is needed by the many students whose long-term interests are focused in medicine, because pre-med is not a major at Pitt. Last term, the UHC began to offer academic advising to pre-med students so they can be well-prepared when they apply for admission to medical school; that is, guidance about what courses they should take and what experiences they should have in the clinics and in research. Beginning next May, the UHC will oversee the pre-Health Professions committee that evaluates the credentials of our student applicants to professional schools of medicine and dentistry and then communicates their findings to those schools. This evaluation and communication is a very important step in the admissions process.

The third pillar of the UHC is *community*. When I was a college student, I was told that the classroom and the library were the two correct answers to the question, “In what college setting does education occur?” But my experience was that two other answers were equally correct, perhaps more correct. One setting was the dormitory and the other was the research laboratory. With regard to the dorms, it is now common knowledge that students learn a tremendous amount from interacting with peers who have different cultural backgrounds and who come to Pittsburgh from all over the country and all over the world. They do not just learn about unfamiliar foods and languages and customs and religions. They learn that diverse students may have different perspectives than they do, and those differences add spice to discussions among the students. In that way college dorms provide a unique learning experience made possible by open doors and open minds. The dorms are where many students on campus feel most at home, where they meet many of the people who become their closest friends, and where they obtain a significant and meaningful component of their education. The positive things that I am saying about dormitory living apply across the Pitt campus. But the honors dorms may be distinctive in that they attract a concentrated community of students who are especially motivated to get an education while they are in college. This community contributes to the social fabric of their college experience in addition to providing a special kind of education.

There are two honors dorms at present, one on the upper campus that holds ~400 freshmen students and one near the corner of Forbes Ave and Craig St, across from the museum and two blocks from the Cathedral, that holds ~100 sophomores and juniors. Next year the UHC will have a third building, Brackenridge Hall, located in the quad area between the Wm Pitt Union and the Book Store, which holds an additional 200 sophomores and juniors. In sum, the three buildings will provide honors housing for ~700 students, more than double the number that was available a few years ago.

The UHC community has other components in addition to the dorms. For example, the UHC sponsors reading groups, in which students gather to informally discuss great books or plays. The UHC also sponsors four publications – focused on fiction or poetry or research or politics – in which all the authors and editors are undergraduate students. The UHC also sponsors a wide range of social activities, including a dance and a flag football tournament and a film series. Students who want to find out about these activities should contact the UHC and ask to be put on the mailing list. But the general point is that the UHC provides an environment in which serious students find like-minded peers at a time in their lives when they are in a rapid stage of

intellectual growth and are especially curious, inquisitive, and sensitive to feedback and encouragement, and consequently the support they receive then may have a lasting positive impact on their development. In this regard, I am reminded of David Frederick, a Pitt graduate and Rhodes Scholar in the 1980's who has become a prominent attorney in Washington and was honored last term by receiving the Legacy Laureate Award of the University. David identified the UHC as his home unit because it had made such an important contribution to his academic development. I know there are many hundreds of Pitt alumni who feel that same special bond to the UHC.

Related to the issue of community, but a separate, fourth pillar of the Honors College, is the unique *research community* that is the Brackenridge Program. Research is a common feature of honors programs because it involves individualized mentoring, like small classes do. Hugh Brackenridge was the name of the first president of the University of Pittsburgh, and our summer research program was named after him in 1989. In fact, many schools have summer research programs in which undergraduate students work with a supervising mentor in a closed laboratory community that may also include graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and research assistants. They all work on related projects, they all have similar interests, they all read the same scientific literature, and they all discuss that literature in journal club meetings within the lab, often using jargon that facilitates their communications. The Brackenridge Program of the UHC is different in an important way from these familiar programs. While Brackenridge students pursue research and scholarship with individual faculty members, in addition they meet for several hours one day each week and present their research to one another, describing what they are doing and explaining why it is worth doing. However, and this is the point, Brackenridge students come from a great many departments all over campus, and so they are not able to use jargon to communicate to one another. Anyone who has tried to explain what they are doing to someone outside their discipline knows that it is a very difficult thing to do. Brackenridge students soon get good at that task – good at speaking and good at listening -- and by the end of the summer they have learned an important communication skill as well as obtained a broader perspective of research and scholarship than can be obtained in a single lab, in addition to having had a substantial research experience. That is why it's a special program. A few months ago we extended the Brackenridge Program into the Fall term, and we have extended it again into the present Spring term. In other words, this wonderful research program is no longer just a summer program but is available all year round.

In addition to sponsoring the Brackenridge research program on the Pitt campus, the UHC now sponsors students to pursue research or scholarship projects off-campus whether in the US or abroad. Many undergraduate students do not stay on campus during the summer, so this new program enables them to continue their education while they are away from the University.

The fifth pillar of the Honors College is the *Bachelor's of Philosophy degree*. All universities give bachelor's degrees to certify that a student has passed the requirements of breadth and depth of education. Of course, each college has to decide for itself what it means by breadth and depth. As I mentioned earlier, the UHC gives a baccalaureate degree too, so we also had to decide what we meant by breadth and depth of education. And we have decided. By breadth we mean a broad selection of challenging courses and educational experiences, which are not rigidly defined. By depth we mean something uniquely special. Students pursuing a BPhil degree are required to

perform an independent project of research or scholarship under faculty supervision, culminating in a written thesis document that is presented in public before a faculty committee that includes an examiner from outside the university. If you ask, “What kind of student is able to do such a sophisticated set of tasks?”, the answer is, graduate students do it – usually in pursuit of a Masters degree and always in pursuit of a PhD. But the BPhil is a bachelor’s degree, and no other school anywhere gives this degree with the expectation that undergraduate students perform like graduate students do in this respect. At Pitt it’s a singular achievement, the highest academic award this University can give to an undergraduate student. And only 1 or 2% of undergraduate students receive the degree upon graduation.

Some time during the present calendar year the UHC expects to develop and offer a second certification for exceptional research and scholarship. The new Certificate of Research would be somewhat less demanding than the BPhil but still represent an educational achievement that is beyond the ordinary. Like the requirements for a BPhil, undergraduate students would be expected to pursue a research and scholarship project in considerable depth, and then produce a written document that is defended before a faculty committee. Many of the details of this new program are still unsettled, but the intent of the program is to certify upon graduation that an undergraduate student has done sustained, independent, and productive research on a project of interest to them. I should say that in this description, we are defining the word “research” broadly as in its original meaning, which is *to search again* something that had been previously examined and extract from it additional information of significance to understanding. In other words, the new Certificate program will be available not only to students who pursue laboratory research but also students who pursue any tangible contribution to knowledge in the sciences or humanities.

So these are the five pillars of the UHC at Pitt that have been promoted since the UHC was founded 25 years ago: honors courses, special advising, community, research and scholarship, and certification. To those five I want to add a sixth pillar, the *recognition* of exceptional students. In fact, the UHC has attracted and recognized some exceptionally promising students, the Chancellor’s Scholars, when they matriculate at the University. And later, when students achieve in the college classroom, they may receive one or more of several awards from the University; inclusion in Phi Beta Kappa, for example, and the Dean’s List, awards that are common to most schools. I want to establish a new award that recognizes academic competence in Pitt students, and additionally emphasizes character as a second consideration. By character I mean leadership plus generosity of spirit, as may be seen when students use their special talents to help others who are less gifted and fortunate. This willingness to help others, both abroad and at home, is a core value of such widely admired programs as the Peace Corps and Teach for America, and I would like it to be a feature of the new award.

Recently Cory Rogers was awarded the Rhodes Scholarship, which recognizes this dimension of character in addition to academic competence. However, we had four candidates for the Rhodes, and in my opinion they all deserved to win the award. Nina Weaver, Sesi Aliu, and Max Greenwald were the other three candidates. Each is an accomplished, broadly educated leader, industrious in habit and generous of spirit. I will propose that we honor such students not only as a way of recognizing their noteworthy achievements but also because they represent the ideals of the UHC. I should not fail to mention that Honors College advisors help to guide students in this

competition for prestigious national awards, and that over the years Pitt students have won a great many of them.

In this talk I have focused attention on the UHC, but before closing I want to say something briefly about my personal mission as Dean of the UHC. I'll begin by saying that all four of my grandparents were immigrants. They came to the United States in the early years of the 20th century, seeking more and better opportunities than were available to them in eastern Europe. My parents told me that they learned from their parents three rules for being successful in the US: work hard, be honest, and get an education. And I learned those rules too, and I have tried to pass them on to others. Those rules have personal meaning to me but they are not original. They echo Thomas Jefferson's view that the American democratic experience requires an informed citizenry, and that all of our citizens should be well-educated. Thus, I believe our job at the University of Pittsburgh is to educate our students so they can become excellent citizens of the United States and of the world; not only informed but responsible and caring – with the intelligence to know what has to be done and the character to get it done honorably and respectfully. In pursuing that goal, I intend to build on the outstanding work that was done by Alec Stewart, the founding Dean of the UHC, and to maintain and expand the programs that have worked so well in the past while introducing new programs that will make the UHC even more effective in the future.

I want to close by saying again that the UHC is an unusual honors college. It has alumni but it doesn't have students. And it sponsors courses but it doesn't have faculty members. Next month, the UHC will celebrate the 25th anniversary of its founding in 1987. During those 25 years ago there is little doubt that the UHC has contributed substantially to the University. It has done so in practical ways such as by helping to recruit superb students who raise the average entrance scores, who win prestigious national scholarships, and who increase the University's national ranking. Those are real benefits, but that's not nearly the sum of it. The UHC also fosters the best educational standards and values while providing numerous opportunities for students and faculty members to do their best work. And it prepares students to become learners and thinkers for the rest of their lives. In short, I view the UHC as a symbol of what the University of Pittsburgh and the whole institution of education is for.

And on that note I will stop. Thank you all very much for your attention.