

# Enhancing an Education



## *The All-College Honors Program*

When she was a student at Nardin Academy, Mollie Strasser excelled in whatever she chose to do. A member of the National Honor Society, Mollie was also on the speech and debate team, the photography editor for the yearbook, she wrote a column in the school newspaper, played various roles in school plays and musicals, and was a member of varsity track and field. So, when it came time to shop for a college, Mollie wanted an institution that would enhance her educational experience and challenge her intellectual curiosity.



Mollie Strasser '01

Just as Mollie has grown in the Honors Program, so has the program itself. Originally established in the mid-1960s, the All-College Honors Program was created to enrich the education of the college's most intellectually gifted undergraduates through a variety of disciplines designed to provide students with a truly liberal education. At its inception, the Honors Program was small. It consisted of a series of advanced courses, which culminated in a senior thesis and graduated about 15 students a year. A more structured Honors Program was instituted in the 1970s as the population at the college began to grow. But by 1985, enrollment at Canisius increased significantly and the framework of the Honors Program had to

be reinvented to meet the demands of the growing student population. Today, the All-College Honors Program enjoys a combined class enrollment of 250 students and the framework of the program continues to evolve.

"Sometimes, when a program grows," says Dr. Robert J. Butler, director of the All-College Honors Program, "you worry that maybe you're lowering your standards. But that is certainly not the case here. While the Honors Program is getting bigger, we are proud to say that its growth has not been achieved at the expense of academic quality."

In fact, adds Dr. Butler, the standards for the All-College Honors Program are becoming more demanding. In 1995, the honors committee recruited students who

Naturally, she found what she was looking for at Canisius. Mollie's grades combined with her SAT scores not only earned her acceptance into Canisius but an invitation into the esteemed All-College Honors Program.

"I can honestly say the Honors Program has made me a more well-rounded person," says Mollie, a senior communications major and psychology minor. "The program opened my eyes to so many different possibilities and over four years, made me a more intelligent person."

carried a high school average of 90 and scored at least 1200 on the SAT. The current prerequisite requires students to have a high school average of 92 and score a minimum of 1220 on the SAT. Still, the average honors student exceeds even these standards. Students in the freshman class of 2000 averaged 95.5 in high school and 1262 on the SAT.

But the growth of the All-College Honors Program goes beyond just high marks. Throughout its evolution the honors committee has strived to create new and challenging courses, complimentary to a conventional education but consistent with the rigorous curriculum of the Honors Program and the Jesuit tradition of academic excellence.

For Larry Vilardo, a 1977 Canisius graduate and a partner in the law firm of Connors & Vilardo, what the Honors Program did best was provide the framework for interdisciplinary learning.

“It integrated the history, political science, literature and art courses we were studying into one larger framework,” says Vilardo, “so that you could see how the different areas interrelated with each other at any given time period in history.”

While the core curriculum of the Honors Program parallels the college’s standard curriculum, honors courses are consistently more demanding and immediately engage students in very small classes designed to promote group discussion and develop critical thinking and research skills – skills that students take with them once they leave Canisius.

“When I visit an art museum today or listen to a piece of music,” notes Vilardo, “I don’t just say ‘what a nice picture’ or ‘how interesting that piece is.’ I integrate it into the period when it was written or produced and ask myself ‘what was going on in that period?’ ”

Scott Sroka '94, a regional representative



Dr. Robert J. Butler, director of the All-College Honors Program

for NYS Senator Charles Schumer, adds “We did an awful lot of reading, writing, speaking and presenting in the Honors Program. Those are skills that I used practicing law on a daily basis and now working in government.”

For current students in the Honors Program, the critical thinking skills they develop are put to use in their junior and senior year through a series of independent research projects, which culminates in a senior thesis and an interdisciplinary capstone project. This level of independent work requires students to drive their own education and has proven to be one of the program’s greatest assets in developing active learners.

“One of the most amazing things in the Honors Program is that it emulates the idea of interdisciplinary learning,” says Mollie. “Because the coursework is so varied, it is an exercise in learning about new things. You really begin to see how everything relates to each other. I no longer take things at face value. I question things more and I know that is the result of having to in class.”

As the lines between disciplines begin to blur, so do the traditional roles of students and teachers. Honors students are encouraged – almost expected – to challenge their professors with questions and opposing ideas. At the same time, the professors often find themselves in the seat of the student. The result can be a lively intellectual exchange, which educates both the student and the professor.

“The Honors Program is supposed to prepare you to be a leader,” says freshman honors student, Lucian Sikorskyj. He and his twin brother, Jerod, graduated top of their class from St. Francis High School. Both had their choice of colleges and universities but both decided – individually – to come to Canisius for their education. One big selling point: the All-College Honors Program. “If you’re going to be a leader, you need to know how to think on your own and think for yourself,” Lucian adds. “That’s why the courses in the Honors Program are so great. They teach you first



## THE ALL-COLLEGE HONORS PROGRAM

### *by the numbers*

**250**

the combined enrollment

**1262**

the average SAT score  
of the fall 2000 entering class  
in the Honors Program

**95.5**

the high school average  
of the fall 2000 entering class  
in the Honors Program

**95**

the percentage of  
honors students accepted  
into medical school

[www.canisius.edu/honors](http://www.canisius.edu/honors)

to be a critical thinker and whether you like to talk or not, they really engage you in debate and discussion so that you learn part of being an educated individual is being able to communicate effectively.”

In recent years, this classroom experience of the Honors Program has been enhanced even further with the endowment of several new resources aimed at making the program academically richer and much more attractive to prospective students. The creation of the Honors Clubroom, two years ago, serves as a valuable resource for students looking for a quiet study or meeting place. Martin Hall opened in fall 1999 as a special residence and intellectual home for “the best of the best” honors students. Lucian and Jerod both reside in Martin Hall and say the community experience, which fosters a unique living and learning environment, was an added selling point in their decision to come to Canisius.

“You have some of the best people in the program living in the Martin house,” explains Jerod. “It’s very reminiscent to me of the Cardinal Newman idea of education where if you give the students the books and you give them a community to live in they will learn amongst themselves.”

But it is an Oishei Professorship, designated to the program this past fall, which has added tremendous new vitality to the Honors Program. The \$75,000 grant made possible three new interconnected honors courses, a speakers program, an honors Web site ([www.canisius.edu/honors](http://www.canisius.edu/honors)), an honors program journal and scholarly trips to local, regional and national sites. For many honors students, including Mollie Strasser, the Oishei grant is enabling them to experience their education by doing things and seeing places they might never have had the opportunity to.

“I am so excited that I was chosen to take the next trip to Boston,” says Mollie. “I’ve never been to Boston and a lot of the things we’re going to see – the museums, the architecture – they’re all things I have looked at, researched or studied in my honors classes.”

One of the most tangible and convincing signs of the academic quality housed in the Honors Program is its excellent record

of fellowships, scholarships and placements. Since 1995, four honors students have been awarded Fulbright/Hays Fellowships, two honors students won Jacob Javits Scholarships, another honors student was awarded an Andrew Mellon Fellowship and another an Arthur M. Carter Scholarship. In addition, numerous honors students from Canisius have been accepted to prestigious graduate programs and medical schools at places such as Georgetown, Northwestern, Notre Dame, Duke and Brown University.

“The Honors Program places students at a very good rate in graduate school,” notes Dr. Butler. “The college itself has a 95 percent placement rate and the Honors Program is at least as good as that – if not better.”

Just as impressive is the placement rate for honors students who are eager to enter the workforce following graduation. Lisa Scott, a 1993 graduate of the Honors Program and morning anchor of *Wake Up!*

on WIVB-TV in Buffalo, is convinced her *magna cum laude* honors degree in English and communications, helped land her first job in television news.

“I had to go to Bangor, Maine, which is a very tiny television market,” she says. “They didn’t have the budget to fly people in for interviews, so a lot of faith in hiring me was based on a telephone interview and my résumé. They could see that I went through a pretty rigorous program in college and it added a lot of credibility.”

Confident that the Honors Program developed her into a person that can think and act critically, Mollie Strasser will also be looking for work following graduation in May. She hopes to turn her internship at a local advertising agency into a full-time job.

“My eyes are open now to so many different things that I didn’t have a clue about or even care about when I came here as a freshman,” she says. “If anything, the Honors Program has opened me up and made me more receptive to the different things around me, more intuitive to the things around me.”

For former students of the Honors Program, such as Scott Sroka, the experience taught them that an education is a lifetime pursuit. “Some of the greatest things I learned in the Honors Program,” says Scott, “had less to do with the actual subject matter and more to do with growing in intellectual curiosity.” He adds, “The Honors Program provided a terrific balance between the social aspect of



(L) Lucian and (R) Jerod Sikorskyj '04 discuss their work in the All-College Honors Program.

college life and the intellectual, academic side of college life which continue to be important even after you graduate.”

As for Dr. Butler, his work with the ever-evolving All-College Honors Program will continue so that potential students to the program are challenged in new ways which help them to think broadly about the value of education and what it means to be an educated person.

“The students we work with in the Honors Program are truly engaging and very bright kids who teachers dream of working with,” says Dr. Butler. “And what they get from the Honors Program is not only an intrinsically stronger education but a credential that opens doors for them.” ■