



# COLLEGIUM

THE HONORS COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER

SEPTEMBER 2025

## TRADITIONED INNOVATION IN THE HONORS CURRICULUM

Dr. Scott Huelin



For the last 15 years, the Honors Community has made good on our promise to provide a unique intellectual *koinonia* among students and faculty at Union. Students routinely tell us how much they value their Honors courses, and faculty often refer to Honors teaching as the most rewarding experiences of their careers.

For all this success, we also have experienced an increasing number of challenges over the years. As majors continue to expand in hours and demand more curricular real estate in the first two years, fewer students have room for even one 6-credit hour course, much less 3. Furthermore, each year it seems that Honors-eligible students bring an even larger haul of college credit with them to Union, making them less interested in our alternative to Union's Core. And in the last decade we never have managed to provide a four-year Honors experience for more than a handful of our students. That's why I'm pleased to announce a number of changes we have made to the Honors curriculum. These changes have been designed both to preserve what everyone most values in our academic work while also addressing these very real challenges.

Before we began making any changes, we spent some time discerning what exactly has made the Honors academic experience so unique and so worthwhile. The word that kept rising to the surface in these deliberations was "integration." In its broadest and most common usage, "integration" suggests bringing together disparate parts to form a whole. In the Honors Community, we always have intentionally and thoughtfully pursued four kinds of academic integration:

- **Faith and Reason:** Integrating faith and reason is implied in the very motto of the University, *religio et eruditio*, and is central to the purpose of any Christian university.
- **Humanities and Sciences:** All truth is God's truth. While disciplinary silos have

their uses, they are counterproductive to Christian formation if they prevent seeing the whole of creation as a purposeful unity. So we put a wide array of academic disciplines into conversation with one another.

- **Theory and Practice:** Faith without works is dead (Jas 2.26); doing without understanding is also dead (Mk 7.1-8).
- **Head and Heart:** Aligning the intellect and the emotions with the truth is a particularly important task for Christian discipleship in the context of late modernity, for "what we love we grow to resemble" (Bernard of Clairvaux).

Moreover, our English word "integrate" ultimately derives from a Latin word meaning "to make whole" or "to restore." Our academic work in the Honors Community is, then, redemptive work, offering both students and faculty the tools to participate in the Lord's ongoing work of re-creation, of making all things new (Rev 21.5).

How does all of this translate into the specifics of curricular change? As of this fall, the General Honors program is no more. We have expanded it into a 4-year program we call Honors Integrative Studies. There is no need to panic, however. Wisdom, Beauty, Creation, and Justice still feature prominently in this new curriculum, but they do so with a smaller footprint: 4 credit hours each instead of 6. By keeping that fourth hour, we managed to hold on to the distinctive plenary/seminar dynamic of these beloved courses. In addition to these *Honors Signature Courses*, as they are now known, the Honors Integrative Studies curriculum includes upper-level courses, and these in 3 kinds.

*Honors Colloquia* are 1-hour, faculty-led book discussion groups focusing on important works from the Christian Intellectual Tradition or responding to it. This fall, Dr. Barnard is leading Colloquia on C. S. Lewis' *The Problem of Pain* and *Mere Christianity*.

Also new this fall are *Honors Practica*, 2-hour courses focusing on the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and/or virtues through practice and experience. Dr. Thomas leads a

Practicum on prayer, while Prof. Moore guides students in exploring the relation of walking to intellectual and creative life.

Finally, *Honors Integrative Seminars* provide faculty from across campus with the opportunity to teach 3-hour courses that reflect their own research interests while also engaging in at least one of the four forms of academic integration described above. (These courses will debut in fall of 2026.) Both the Honors Signature courses and the new upper-level courses can be applied toward a new Minor in Honors Integrative Studies, thus making our curriculum more attractive to students arriving with most of their Core requirements satisfied.

Despite all of these changes, Discipline-specific Honors remains the same and, in most majors, can be combined with the Minor in Honors Integrative Studies, thus providing students with multiple paths to a 4-year Honors experience.

I hope you share our excitement for this new season in the life of the Honors Community, and I hope you can also see how we have been careful to preserve the essential DNA of the Honors experience over the last 15 years. After all, the best forms of institutional innovation are those grounded in tradition, and we feel confident that we have met effectively the challenges of the present without sacrificing the goods we have shared in the past.

If you would like to know more about these changes, we'd love to have you come for a visit and sit in on either a new or a newly renovated Honors class. Once a member of the Honors Community, always a member of the Honors Community.

HONORS  
at  
UNION

EXCELLENCE-DRIVEN | CHRIST-CENTERED  
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## HONORS ALUMNI: WHERE THEY ARE NOW

### **Crista Wilhite Beals ('19)**

Artistic Director of Hub City Theatre Company, which she founded with fellow Honors alumna Nicole (Snover) Shelley. Crista also serves as the Media Director at Northside Church.

### **Avery Rist Valenciano ('20)**

Grant writer at Stability First, a Christian non-profit. Avery recently married Dominick.

### **Abbey Orwig ('24)**

Upper School teacher of Humanities at Augustine School. Abbey is also pursuing a Masters Degree in Classical Christian Studies through New Saint Andrews College.

### **Jon Hudson ('22)**

Currently finishing up an MSc degree in Comparative Education and International Development at the University of Edinburgh.

### **Ben Marsch ('21)**

Senior Design Engineer at MAT Industries in Jackson, TN, where he designs air compressors. He and Allison (Honors Alum '21) are expecting their second child, a girl.

### **Caleb Green ('21)**

Working on an MLitt in Theology at the University of St. Andrews.

### **Mary Swisher ('20)**

Serves as the Area Director for Young Life in Grenoble, France.

### **Emmeline Arehart ('24)**

Media Production Specialist at Leaders Credit Union. In November, she will marry Brennan Kress (Honors Alum '22).

### **Jonathan Pope ('18)**

Lead Pastor of Springhill Baptist Church in Paris, TN. He and his wife Bailee welcomed their first child last spring.

### **Lydia (Kaercher) Fulks ('17)**

Part-time NICU nurse at night. Lydia and Johnny have three young children, and Lydia stays home with them during the day.

### **Mason Ruby ('18)**

Assistant Professor of Computer Science at Union University.

### **Syndi (Caruvana) Burgin ('22)**

Project Engineer at Advance Storage Products. She and Cameron are expecting their first child in December.

### **Jamie Hodge ('21)**

Making pottery and art in Huntsville, AL. Jamie also works as a dental lab technician.

### **Kimberly (Chavers) Gardner ('17)**

Founder of WhyHireImmigrants in Memphis, TN. She also works as a private contractor with the US Department of State's English Language Programs, teaching English remotely in other countries.

### **Christine Ryan ('14)**

Director of Operations at two Chick-fil-As in St. Louis, MO. In 2024, she graduated from Covenant Theological Seminary with a MA in Biblical and Theological Studies.

### **Joey Bakeer ('17)**

Hospice and palliative care physician in Little Rock, AR. He and Randi welcomed their first child earlier this year.

### **Daniel Regan ('18)**

Financial controller for a commercial truck dealership in Georgia.

### **Amber (Greenburg) Rhodes ('21)**

Amber works at Cypress Nature Grove alongside Honors alumnus Daris Mullin ('21). She and her husband Micah ('21) have a one-year-old son.

### **Ruth (Bone) Bentley ('15)**

Married to Matt (UU '14) and mom to two sons. Ruth works as a family nurse practitioner in Boulder, CO.

### **Jordan Sellers ('17)**

Graduated with an MSc in Architectural Conservation from the University of Edinburgh in 2022. Jordan started a PhD at the University of Western Ontario this September.

### **Eliana Gordillo ('25)**

2nd Grade teacher at Denmark Elementary School, southwest of Jackson, TN.

### **Natalie (McVay) Renfrow ('25) and Timothy Renfrow ('24)**

Living in Virginia Beach, VA, where Natalie is pursuing a Doctor of Psychology degree in Clinical Psychology at Regent University and working as a Registered Behavior Technician and music teacher. Timothy is a Pharmacy Technician at CVS and is continuing seminary through Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

### **Katelyn (Walls) Shelton ('16)**

Stay-at-home mom to four children. Katelyn is a recipient of the Novak Journalism Fellowship this year, writing on reproductive biotechnologies, and she also serves as a Visiting Fellow for the Ethics and Public Policy Center (EPPC).

*We would love to hear from you! Email us at [honors@uu.edu](mailto:honors@uu.edu) with your most recent news and contact information.*

## THE BOOKSHELF

**What are Honors faculty and staff reading this year?**

### **Dr. Jason Crawford**

- *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen

### **Dr. Phil Davignon**

- *Why Religion Went Obsolete: The Demise of Traditional Faith in America* by Christian Smith

### **Dr. Scott Huelin**

- *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ* by J. Todd Billings  
- *The Thirteen American Arguments: Enduring Debates That Define and Inspire Our Country* by Howard Fineman

### **Professor Joy Moore**

- *The Sabbath* by Abraham Joshua Heschel

### **Dr. David Thomas**

- "Homemade Fig Newtons Recipe" - <https://www.serious-eats.com/homemade-fig-newtons-recipe>

### **Anna Tobler**

- *The Stream and the Sapphire* by Denise Levertov

### **Dr. Joshua Veltman**

- *Consider the Lilies: Finding Perfect Peace in the Character of God* by Jonny Ardavanis

*What are you reading? You can always email us at [honors@uu.edu](mailto:honors@uu.edu) to chat, swap titles, or update your contact info.*



## COURSE REFLECTION: JUSTICE

Esther Noeth

When I look back on my time in the Justice course, I always wince a little bit. I remember the effort I did *and didn't* put in, and I regret the lessons I missed learning. Most significantly, I realize that the Justice course taught me to value effort and passion within the classroom. From classics to modern social thought to ancient philosophers, it pushed me to put in the time and work for my education. This seems only *just*, right?

At the beginning of the year when I stepped into the Honors classroom, I thought I knew what to expect. After all, I'd taken Honors Beauty the year before! I glanced around at my bookish classmates, quickly realizing that group discussions were going to be incredibly odd, perhaps even awkward. (And they certainly were sometimes). Next, I turned to assess our professor: he was a sweet, quiet man, so I assumed that he would be an easy teacher. No problem, I thought, this class would be just like all the other ones. I relaxed.

Big mistake. When the first Plato paper rolled around, I was completely unprepared. The entire unit had been a lengthy philosophical conversation on ideals of justice and the rightly-ordered heart. Obviously, I found it difficult to properly discuss these things without entirely completing the readings, but I somehow managed to sneak by. Throughout this unit, though, I slowly found myself intrigued by the *small* bits and pieces of Plato that I *did* put effort into. After all, if people had considered Socrates' arguments for thousands of years, there had to be *something* there to learn.

But that didn't stop me from procrastinating my paper. I pushed it off over and over. Naturally, on the last day before the unit paper was due, I wasn't any more inclined to write it. So I half-heartedly tossed the paper together, submitted it a few hours late, and didn't give it a second thought. However, my attentive professor saw right through me. I received a grade that accurately reflected my work (or lack thereof), and some constructive criticism that might help me improve.

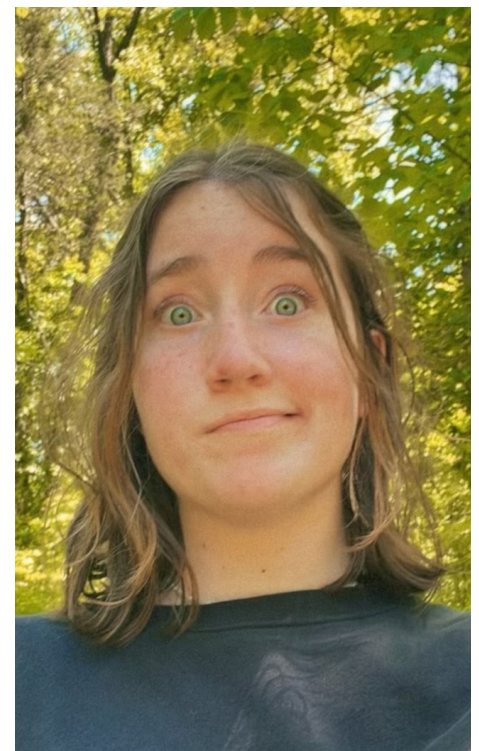
After breezing through modern social ethics with Sandell, we tackled the Civil Rights unit. To give a little perspective: I come from a generation that's chronically-disassociated when it comes to most political issues. We don't really get involved unless we feel personally affected or threatened. So, I was surprised to find that Wendell Berry's conversations on race and religion had much to say that was *incredibly relevant to my life*. He wrote of the historical wounds that formed the South by way of unraveling his family's history and his own childhood experiences. As a student currently living in the South, I started to see strong ties between the society I participate in today and the one he saw during his lifetime. Suddenly, words were jumping off the pages of books and into my life!

As the Justice course does every year our class took a trip to the Civil Rights museum in Memphis where Martin Luther King, Jr was assassinated: this was the perfect end to a powerful unit. My reflection paper—submitted on time—was certainly improved, but still not amazing. Finally, I was beginning to care. I wrote about modern civil justice matters that were impacting my personal life and the lives of those I knew, and this was evident in my writing. Albeit a little short, this essay was definitely showing improvement.

Finally, the course's end rolled around. Everyone else I knew was excitedly planning, preparing, and composing their last paper. I was stumped. Because I *wanted* to be excited about the final essay—to write about something that mattered to me—but I had no idea where to start! After a visit with my patient professor, an idea took root. The thesis of my essay sprouted from things I'd been mulling over all semester, like "*is justice based on thoughts or feelings?*" and "*who does justice actually help if it's stuck in the clouds of idealism?*" So, I began crafting one of my favorite pieces to date. I poured my heart and soul into that essay, scouring the library for sources and my notes for cross-references. When I submitted

it, I knew I had done a good job. I was proud to know that I had invested time and effort into understanding and applying Justice, no matter the grade I received.

Okay, great. I have learned the value of writing essays and reading books, which I should have learned long ago. But what does any of this have to do with *Justice*? Well, everything. The point of the Justice course is to prove to students that justice is not only a concept to be philosophically puzzled over but also a real, tangible way of life that is worth seeking. I learned all too well that however much I put into the existing systems, I received in full. I am faced with a choice every day: I can distance myself from the legal or civil rights issues of my day—letting injustice have the final word—or I can step in and start caring. By allowing me to see the personal significance and gratifying returns of hard work, this course has taught me how to apply myself well and thoughtfully consider how I can make a difference in the world around me. As it turns out, Justice is universal, personal, and much more interesting than I ever thought it would be.





# HIGHLIGHTS

## August 2024

The Honors Community welcomed its largest cohort to date, 52 students, and introduced its first annual Honors Community Convocation.

## September 2024

The Honors Student Association (HSA) hosted their first movie night of the year and watched *The Lego Batman Movie*. Several weeks later, they held a trivia night.

## October 2024

The Honors Community gathered to watch *Wildcat*, based on the life of Flannery O'Connor, followed by a panel discussion of the film and O'Connor's life and work.

HSA sponsored tickets for Honors students to attend MainStage Theatre's production of *Almost, Maine*. Later in the month, HSA hosted a fall party complete with costumes, pumpkin carving, caramel apples, and a campfire.

On Campus and Community Day, 30 members of the Honors Community worked with master gardeners at Liberty Garden Park & Arboretum.

## November 2024

The Honors Community held its annual Cèilidh at the Farmer's Market.

HSA celebrated Thanksgiving by gathering for a potluck.

## December 2024

Six Honors students — four General Honors, two Discipline-Specific Honors — graduated from Union.

## January 2025

Honors leadership hosted a meeting to introduce students to the new Honors program, Honors Integrative Studies. Dr. Barnard opened the meeting by reading a story from *Frog and Toad*.

## February 2025

HSA sponsored tickets for another MainStage production: *Antigone*.

## March 2025

HSA hosted two events: hide-n-seek in the PAC and a hiking trip at Pinson Mounds.

Students in the Beauty class traveled to Chicago to tour the Art Institute of Chicago and attend the symphony, while students in the Justice class visited the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis.

## April 2025

HSA hosted their final event of the year: a painting night by the PAC fountain.

7 Discipline-Specific Honors students defended their theses at Scholarship Symposium.

Three Honors faculty members were honored at Awards Day. Dr. Phil Davignon received the innovative teaching award, Dr. Jason Crawford received the faculty researcher of the year award, and Dr. David Thomas received the faculty member of the year award.

The Honors Community held its annual end-of-the-year banquet with over 100 attendees. The Randall Bush Scholarship for study abroad was awarded to Lillian Walker, and the Koinonia Award was presented to Eliana Isom for significant contributions to the communal life of Honors.

## May 2025

The Honors Community celebrated the graduation of 34 students: 23 General Honors, 7 University Honors, and 4 Discipline-Specific Honors.

## July 2025

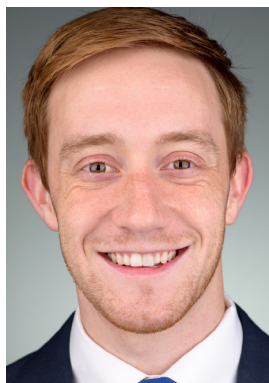
In partnership with several regional private schools, the Honors Community hosted a classical education conference at Union entitled *Christ the Paedagogus* with over 70 attendees.





## ALUMNI REFLECTION

### Andrew Stricklin ('15)



A couple of months ago I sat on a rocking chair in Michigan next to my new high school friend. I was asking him the questions I always ask at Young Life camp; one of

which is “What does Jesus want from you?” He answered, “I think Jesus just wants me to be happy and not, you know, suffer.” I smiled and in my kindest tone said “wrong!”

I grew up in the same town as him. The same churches, same schools, same people. I know that, just like me at his stage, nobody has ever taught him about suffering. Suffering is something they mentioned at youth group as happening to missionaries. For me it wasn't until I was sitting in Wisdom class discussing the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Flannery O'Connor stories, and the Wisdom scriptures that I was given a chance to contemplate suffering in the Christian life. Now when I read Jesus' words the constant talk of suffering seems so obvious that I had to fight back a smile at my friend's answer.

On October 13, 2019, I learned a lot more about suffering. It was shortly after 4AM and I found myself praying aloud in horror and desperation with my wife Nicki. My firstborn Samuel was delivered via emergency C-section, yet all I heard was silence. I stood from my stool positioned by my wife's head and looked at the baby warmer to see CPR being performed on Sam. This went on for fourteen long minutes. The entire room was shell-shocked. He regained a pulse by God's grace and survived. Multiple conference meetings were held in follow-up trying to make sense of his bizarre case. Nine days after he was born, my sister died by suicide.

In days like those you hear a lot of platitudes. Standing in the receiving line at my sister's visitation it was inevitable to hear “everything happens for a reason.” If I really believed God had a reason to harm to my firstborn and take my sister, my faith would crumble. My sister died for no

reason. My son was born dead for no reason (though, praise God, he lives). Honors taught me something important where my church and Christian community had failed. I learned in our study on Ecclesiastes that this suffering and pain truly is “Meaningless! Meaningless!”

And yet I trust in the beautiful redemptive work of Jesus. How am I to understand the fullness of His goodness apart from believing fully in the meaninglessness of suffering and death? Nicki's cousin Kacey is a wonderful artist and gifted us a painting before Sam was born. The painting depicted a little boy walking next to our dog down a forest path toward a mountain. In the days leading up to his birth it hung above his crib in anticipation. It hung there when we were told Sam was unlikely to walk on his own; his MRI confirmed brain damage. Kacey explained to us that wasn't correct. She explained her painting was a vision from God, not just a cute idea. In her vision Sam was walking, so she boldly proclaimed he would be able to walk on his own.

Samuel was indeed walking on time. He lives with no deficits, and his healing was revealed before his tragic birth had even taken place. I never paid attention to art before taking the Beauty class. Dr. Huelin (HuDog for those who know) was my guide to an entirely foreign experience. Exploring art, particularly the Byzantine Christ, was a transformative experience for my faith.

One more story. When the delta wave of COVID hit in 2021 I was the senior resident doctor in Wake Forest's ICU. It killed the old, the ill, the young, the pregnant, the healthy. I put a lot of people on ventilators knowing they were going to die anyway (though I would encourage palliative care instead). In their last lucid moments, we would talk. I told them they were going to die. I would offer to pray with them. I would ask them what they believed. I would ask them to make phone calls to family to say goodbye. The most common expressed thought after these conversations was “well, I want to live, so go ahead and intubate me.” I am certain this was denial as a coping mechanism, but I was shocked at this degree of thoughtlessness in the face of such blunt conversations.

This thoughtlessness is a pattern I have noticed repeatedly in my career of emergency medicine. People, whether old or young, have not and will not contemplate their mortality. Most people live a life unexamined. They don't know how to suffer because they have not been willing to engage with it. They miss the beauty of redemption because they won't acknowledge the universal curse of death that so desperately needs redeeming. I find myself equipped to help those patients and I owe it to the Honors program. If I wasn't a thoughtful person – if I just plowed through four years of chemistry and then medical training with no one teaching me about Wisdom or Beauty or Justice to round me out – I don't think I would be qualified to lead the conversations many of my patients really need.

I'd be remiss if in my gratitude I didn't mention a few specifics of my appreciation. First toward Dr. Huelin for being the mastermind of Honors and inviting me to write this piece. I won't ever forget the inaugural meeting where he explained how Union's Honors program was different. It was from that moment that I knew I was in for a life changing education. Also to Dr. Barnard for many things: traveling to Louisville years ago to advocate for life, telling me that we will be gardeners in heaven (hearing this was the foundational reason that I began to keep a garden and still do), recommending dense books about death, and being selfless to stop in Paducah to spend time with my family. I am grateful to Tracie for her mentorship and enduring friendship toward Nicki. Finally, though he left Jackson long ago, to Dr. Worley. He welcomed me into his small group at church, then to live in his home, and continues to be the most hospitable friend I know. He will always be welcome to ride shotgun in the unyielding colonelmobile.





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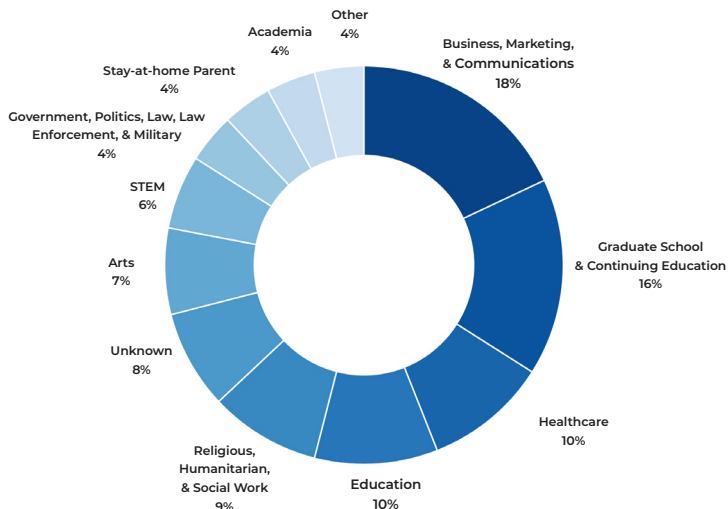
## HONORS COMMUNITY

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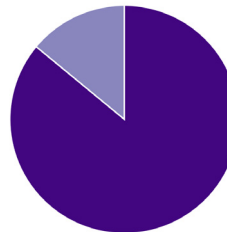
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# HONORS *at* UNION

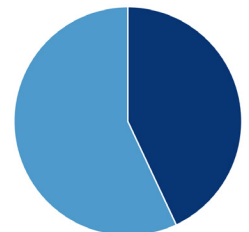
## 506 Graduates in 13 years



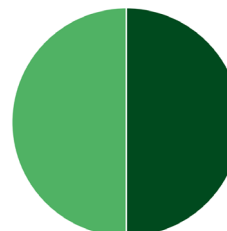
14% of Undergraduate, Traditional, Full-Time Student Body



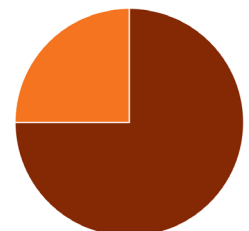
57% of Debate Team



50% of Resident Advisors



25% of Student Awards Day Recipients



177 current students in 67 different majors