



History of the Iona College Honors Program

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The Iona College Honors Program: A Very Brief History

Starting in 1958, Iona College began to develop an Honors Program (see *The Ionian*, December 2, 1964, p. 3). All early descriptions of the program note that it is “designed to aid the superior student in receiving the fullest possible benefit from the intellectual and cultural resources of the College (Iona College Catalog, 1960-61, p. 38; *The Ionian*, April 26, 1961, p. 5), a goal still very much the driving force behind the program today, more than 50 years later, if the specific adjectives now used are, “ablest and most highly motivated” (Iona College Catalog, 1999-2000, p. 38). However, the growth and exact content of this early program were described as “somewhat informal” (*The Ionian*, April 26, 1961, p. 5). But the enthusiasm and dedication were robust, and to a contemporary teacher, exciting to look back on:

Monthly meetings in the faculty lounge (complete with refreshments) are held for discussion of pertinent topics. Discussions of a possible Iona Film Festival, Church-State Relations, Censorship, Anti-Intellectualism on the Campus, and other contemporary problems have been among recent topics. Faculty members of the Honors Program Board lead the talks and provide the needed restraint when the arguments become a bit too vehement. (ibid.)

This initial instantiation of the program seems to have been mostly to augment the required courses at Iona with an extra level of discussion and analysis, as well as “theatre parties [and] museum tours” (ibid.). The special focus was to give the best students the opportunity for “intensive study in particular fields” (ibid.). These beginning years of ICHP were guided by Br. Charles Quinn and Mr. John Burke (*The Ionian*, December 2, 1964, p. 3), and a committee on the Honors Program (Iona College Catalog, 1962-63, p. 52).

The Honors Program underwent a revision in 1964, giving it content more similar to what we have today, in which students are required to take a certain number of credits within a variety of fields, but choose these from upper level courses rather than the basic, core classes required of other Iona students: “The main emphasis of this new schedule is to allow the student a little more freedom to broaden his understanding” (*The Ionian*, November 11, 1964, p. 3). This was deemed necessary to avoid both too much freedom on the student’s part – what some had deemed as appealing to and creating “pseudo-intellectuals” (*The Ionian*, December 2, 1964, p. 3) – while grounding them in a broad, liberal arts curriculum, and still preparing them “to meet the requirements of post-graduate fellowships and grants” (ibid.). This ambitious and forward looking development was overseen by Br. McKenna (then Vice President of the College,

subsequently its fifth president) and put into the hands of the program's first Director, Dr. Bernard Dick of the Classics Department.

Soon after this revision, the formative element of a spirited discussion by students and faculty – so prominent but informal in the initial development of the program – was made a formal requirement of the program. This was the Honors Seminar (sometimes also called “Colloquia” – see *The Ionian*, April 11, 1980, p. 5; *The Ionian*, October 1, 1980, p. 4; Iona College Catalog, 1984-85, p. 40), taken during sophomore year. The course consisted of lectures every other week during the entire school year, on a different theme each semester: these themes were broad enough to include speakers from across the disciplines, on such important topics as war and peace (Spring 1984), time (Spring 1985), and sports (Fall 1985). These lectures were open to the entire Iona community. On the weeks that there was not a formal lecture, the sophomore Honors students would meet to discuss the issues raised by the previous week's presentation. This particular version of a sophomore colloquia lasted for over 30 years as part of the program, and the emphasis on the energizing, transformative power of dialectic remains an integral, constitutive part of the program today.



An Honors Colloquium from 1987: from the left, Allan Bloom, author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, Professor Tom Pendleton, Professor Alex Eodice, Professor Gladys Frantz-Murphy, and Professor Fredrica Rudell (photo from *The Ionian*, October 22, 1987, p. 2).

The program grew very slowly during this time: seven Iona students graduated with an Honors degree in May 1966 (*The Ionian*, May 4, 1966, p. 1), and eight did so in May 1981 (*The Ionian*, April 8, 1981, p. 2). The program's small size and its lack of change or controversy for so long perhaps accounts for how *The Ionian* described it in Fall 1986, as “an important feature to the college, [but] generally unknown to the overall

student population” (*The Ionian*, September 18, 1986, p. 2). *The Ionian* also ran multi-issue series in Fall 1990 and Fall 1999, recounting the history of Iona College: amid the lists of buildings constructed and sports played, there was not one mention of the Honors Program in either historical retrospective. The program was quietly and unobtrusively successful.

Although the colloquia remained part of the program for such a long period of time, the curriculum did change around it. The need for and shape of such changes had already been signaled much earlier. As early as 1979, the program, which had originally been designed to afford students greater flexibility, was described as “too inflexible,” prone to “elitism,” and students in it might become too “isolate[d]” from the rest of the Iona community (*The Ionian*, November 1, 1979, pp. 4-5). The program, with its culminating thesis written in junior and senior years, was criticized as too research oriented, and therefore not an attractive option for most students (*The Ionian*, January 31, 1980, pp. 1-2 – hence the very small number graduating with an Honors degree). The original core curriculum was a whopping 76 required credits (24 of them in Philosophy and Theology alone), with only 52 credits allocated for a major and electives (Iona College Catalog, 1969-1970, p. 37). The new curriculum and other changes would seek to strike the right balance between the needs of the “superior student” and his/her inclusion in the larger community, as well as his/her needs for an education both broad and in depth. In the early 90s, the current Honors curriculum took shape, centered around the 12 credits of the Humanities seminar (originally done as two, six credit classes – Iona College Catalog, 1990-1991, p. 32); this was later reconfigured as four, three credit classes (Iona College Catalog, 1999-2000, p. 39). In either version, the seminars have been conducted as vigorous but focused discussions in small seminars, hearkening back to both the colloquia and even back to the first “informal” gatherings of Honors students in the late 50s. ICHP students are still exempt from the introductory level courses in the humanities, but they take upper level courses in these areas, together with other Iona students, thereby raising the level of discourse within the larger community. Finally, on the issue of research, the thesis remains central, but students have sufficient credits to pursue their majors in the arts, sciences, business, or professional programs. Further, with a large grant from American Express (reported as the headline in *The Ionian*, November 22, 2000, pp. 1-2), ICHP students now have financial support to present their research in a variety of fields at professional conferences, nationally and internationally, a practice that has markedly increased in the last several years.

And that, as succinctly as possible, brings us up to the present. The program has evolved and changed greatly, but certain things have remained constant hallmarks throughout its history, and will remain fundamental on into its future: a dedication to the centrality of reasoned discussion and active learning; the deliberate inclusion of both specialization and breadth in education; and the careful balancing of the needs of the “superior student” as an individual, with those of the larger communit(ies) of which s/he is a vital member. These defining characteristics of the Iona College Honors Program are part of the larger phenomenon of honors education nationwide in the last 50 years, to which we will now turn briefly.

The Place of ICHP in the Larger Context of Honors Education

The need for an Honors Program was simply and clearly explained in *The Ionian* shortly after the program began:

A problem which faces many colleges and universities across the country is the education of the ubiquitous “superior student.” This problem is less severe in a university such as Harvard, which accepts only the highest ranking students from across the country and abroad and prepares for them a rigorous and thorough regimen of studies which few other students would be able to handle. In other words, institutions of this caliber accept only superior students and so the entire course of studies at the university is centered around them. (*The Ionian*, March 26, 1969, p. 1)

A handful of superior institutions (e.g. Harvard University) have only “superior students” in attendance, therefore they need no extra planning or programming to aid or support them. As *The Ionian* notes, everything at such a school is geared toward the “superior student,” since that is the only kind of student there. But the vast majority of colleges and universities, even though they may differ significantly from one another (e.g. large state colleges, community colleges, private institutions of all sizes, religiously affiliated schools, etc.), all have in common one major difference from Harvard: their student bodies are not as homogeneous as Harvard’s, when it comes to academic abilities or preparation. All schools have “superior students” – “Students of excellent ability are found in every college and university” (ibid.) – but most have them as a minority that needs to have special programs in place to support them and answer their educational needs. With the creation of ICHP in the early 60s, Iona was responding to a critical need, and one that persists today, since most all institutions still have student populations at various academic levels.

The drive to begin, and then continue and modify an Honors Program at Iona College, started at a time when such initiatives were taking off all over the United States. A few honors programs had been started as far back as the 1920s. (On this early history, esp. the development of the program at Swarthmore, see Julianna K. Chaszar, “The Reinvention of Honors Programs in American Higher Education, 1955-1965,” Diss. Pennsylvania State University, 2008, pp. 17- 30.) But a study begun in 1954 and published in 1958 noted that by that time, only 25% of all U.S. colleges had such a program (William Joseph Codd, “A Survey of the Status of Honors Programs in American Colleges and Universities for 1954,” Diss. University of Washington, 1958, p. 293), and presciently opined that “the probability of the increase of honors or similar programs in the future would seem to be a solid one” (ibid., 295). Answering the general need for such programs, as noted above, as well as responding to the specific pressures of the Cold War and the race for academic excellence in general, and scientific advances in particular, honors programs did in fact proliferate in the late 50s and early 60s. (On the Cold War influence, see Chaszar, “Reinvention of Honors,” pp. 176-177, 185-186.) Honors programs are reported to have tripled between 1957 and 1965 (ibid., p. 184, with references to earlier studies). After this surge, growth in the number of programs slowed

but continued for the rest of the 20th century, and by 2000, nearly all large four-year institutions had such a program (ibid., p. 189, with reference to earlier studies). Iona's move to develop its own honors program was part of this nationwide trend.

Iona's embrace of this needed and exciting innovation was shown by the convening of a conference at Iona on April 24, 1965 (reported in *The Ionian*, April 14, 1965, pp. 1, 3). Presentations were given by representatives from schools with a much longer history in honors education (e.g. Swarthmore College), as well as by those from schools closer to Iona's own experience of being much newer to the process, such as Georgetown University and St. Peter's College. This conference was almost simultaneous with the first annual meeting of the National Collegiate Honors Council, the professional organization for honors programs since 1965. Clearly, honors programs and the benefits they offered were being enthusiastically pursued at Iona and on campuses across the nation. And the benefits, it should be noted, were two-fold – for the individual “superior student,” and for his/her campus at large. This “spillover” has been noted in studies of honors programs: although “the immediate goal was to provide high-achieving students with appropriate intellectual challenges,” a more widespread “climate of increased respect for academic excellence among students and a spillover of honors methods into regular courses” was – and continues to be – noted with these programs (Chaszar, “Reinvention of Honors,” pp. 189, 187).

If in my previous section, I noted how ICHP still stands in continuity with those “vehement” discussions of the late 1950s, a look at the history of honors programs nationwide shows the pedigree is really almost 100 years old. At a conference in March 1925 at the University of Iowa, several points were listed as fundamental and constitutive of the nascent honors programs at the time. Most are still at the center of ICHP, but we may underline several as especially crucial to us as we carry on the legacy of our educational forebears: “Recognition of individual differences... Favorable reaction upon the institution as a whole... Foundation courses and basic sequences in first two years... Concentration in last two years... Balanced development of the whole person” (ibid., p. 26). The same key words keep recurring in descriptions of our own honors program, and those at other schools in previous eras – “individual, whole, balance.” We are proud to take the noble goals of honors education, begun by others early in the 20th century and adopted at Iona shortly after the middle of that century, and now continue their pursuit on into the 21st century.



Barbara Houlihan, counselor in charge of the System of Interactive Guidance and Information computers, with the latest computer technology at Iona College in 1983 (photo from *The Ionian*, February 10, 1983, p. 4).

Fun and Nostalgic Reporting from Old Issues of *The Ionian*

Advertising in the *Ionian* was full of cigarette ads in the late 50s, including such brands as Lucky Strike, Oasis, and Chesterfield. These disappeared in the 60s, when the newspaper ads featured such bygone products as Schaefer and Rheingold beers, Pontiac Firebird automobiles, Burgundy brand pipe tobacco, and Triple-S Blue Stamps (available at Grand Union Supermarkets and Esso gas stations), as well as now long-gone local establishments, like The Church Key and Chaucer's.

Gaels ahead of their time: Most years since 1960, *The Ionian* has published a parody issue around April 1, titled *The Onion*. The more famous *Onion* humorous magazine was founded in 1988.

Some things come full circle. In April 1965, the Honors Program sponsored a lecture in honor of the 700th anniversary of Dante Alighieri's birth; in Fall 2015, there was a lecture given in honor of the 750th anniversary of the Dante's birth. In the late 60s, Iona students published *Reflections*, a "liberal arts magazine" of essays (see *The Ionian*, September 30, 1970, p. 6). In Spring 2015, the first issue of *Bullitus: The Iona College Honors Program Journal* was published with essays on the humanities readings from our seminars.

Iona in the early 60s was very conscious of clothing and its implications. In the October 13, 1965 issue of *The Ionian*, the Dean reminds students that, "If an Iona student dresses like a slob, then it is fairly logical to assume that he will transmit the impression to outsiders that the entire school is composed of such individuals." However, by September 1967, formal dress regulations went from "jacket and tie" to "casual with limitations" – there were to be no collarless shirts, sandals, sneakers, jeans, or shorts. All formal dress regulations were dropped soon after (March 1968).

Issues of *The Ionian* in 1976 included ads for a sort of precursor to the now infamous (and banned in some places) 4 Lokos. "Kickers" were a 30 proof, fruity beverage sold in 4 packs of small, milk jug shaped containers.

The Ramones played at the Mulcahy Campus Center in April 1982.

September 1993 – Iona College bought the property at 45 Beechmont Avenue, the current location of the Honors Program.

Directors of the Iona College Honors Program

Bernard F. Dick, Classics
Director, 1964–1970

Bernard Dick earned his Ph.D. from Fordham after his B.A. from the University of Scranton. He taught at Iona from 1960-1970, before moving on to Fairleigh Dickinson University where he is now an emeritus professor of English. He published widely on film criticism, including his best known work, *The Star-spangled Screen: The American World War II Film* (University Press of Kentucky, 1985).

Robert M. Coogan, CFC, English
Director, 1970 – 1973

Robert Coogan received degrees from Iona College (B.A., 1954), DePaul University (M.A., 1958), and Loyola University (Ph.D., 1967). He specialized in the Continental Renaissance and English Literature and in Rhetorical Theory. He published *Babylon on*

the Rhone: A Translation with Introduction of letters by Dante, Petrarch and Catherine of Siena on the Avignon Papacy (Studia Humanitatis, 1983), and *Erasmus Lee and the Correction of the Vulgate: The Shaking of the Foundations* (Librairie Droz, 1992). He is Professor Emeritus at the University of Maryland where he taught English for 40 years and was Acting Chair of Classics for three.

Catherine Stratton, History
Director, 1973–1980

Catherine Stratton earned her Doctorate at St. John's University in 1984. Her area of expertise is Historical Geography. Most of her research in this field has taken place in Sub-Saharan Africa with a special focus on the East Coast of Africa. She is the author of several scholarly works, including *The Influence of the Fabian Colonial Bureau on the Independence Movement in Tanganyika* (Ohio University Press, 1985). She also served as Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of History.

Henry Freund, Modern Languages
Director, 1980-1984

Henry Freund taught French language and literature at Iona College. He did his undergraduate work at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, and received an M.A. from Columbia University. He lived and studied abroad for a number of years, including one as a Fulbright scholar at the University of Bordeaux.

Mary Lesser, Economics
Director, 1984-1991

Dr. Mary Lesser began teaching at Iona in 1982. She received her B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from Fordham University. From 1997 until 2009, she was the Executive Director of the Eastern Economic Association (headquartered at Iona College), and in 2005, she received Iona College's Presidential Teaching Scholar award and Woman of Achievement Award. Dr. Lesser was named professor emeritus in 2011.

Frances Baillie, Frances Baillie, Computer Science
Director, 1991-1998

Dr. Frances K. Baillie has been teaching in the Computer Science Department at Iona College for over 35 years. She received her Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1990. Her research interests have been introductory computing, computer literacy, educational technology, and, most recently, the role of women in computing. Dr. Baillie has been the department's Internship Coordinator for most of the last thirty years, assisting students in making the connection between classroom knowledge and workplace experience.

Besides serving as Director of the Honors Degree Program, she has been Chair of the Faculty Senate and College Council, Coordinator of Freshman Advisement and Learning Communities in the School of Arts and Science, and now department chair.

Alex Eodice, Philosophy
Director, 1998-2001

Alex Eodice completed his doctoral studies at Fordham University, where he wrote a dissertation on pragmatism and rationality. During his time at Iona College, he has served as Chair of the Philosophy Department, Director of the Honors Program and, from 2001-2008, as Dean of the School of Arts and Science. Professor Eodice regularly teaches courses in introductory and moral philosophy, philosophy of law, and philosophy of mind. He has published articles, book chapters, and encyclopedia entries on various philosophical topics, including legal philosophy, moral theory, the philosophies of Dewey, Wittgenstein, and St. Augustine, and philosophy and popular culture. His ongoing research interests include the role of coercion in law, the problem of consciousness, and free will and determinism.

Br. James Carroll, CFC, History
Director, 2001-2005

Br. James Carroll is a graduate of Iona College, with advanced degrees from the University of Notre Dame (M.A. and Ph.D.) and Providence College (M.Ed.). His teaching interests and publications have been primarily on the American West, especially Native American history.

Deborah Lindsay Williams, English
Director, 2005–2010

Deborah Williams received her B.A. from Wheaton College, and her M.A. and Ph.D. from New York University. She now teaches in the NYU Liberal Studies Program. Her fields of interest include 20th Century U.S. Fiction, Children's Literature, and Feminist Literary History and Historiography. She is the author of a number of articles about U.S. women writers and *Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship*.

Jeanne Zaino, Political Science
Director, 2010-2011

Dr. Jeanne Zaino is a political analyst, commentator, columnist, author, pollster, and professor. She trained at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut with Bud Roper, son of one of the founding fathers of modern

polling, Elmo Roper, and former Director, E. C. Ladd. She received M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She is frequently quoted in news stories and appears regularly on a variety of TV and radio shows to discuss American government and politics.

James Stillwaggon, Education
Director, 2011-2014

James Stillwaggon holds a B.A. from Loyola University in Maryland, and a Ph.D. from Columbia University. During his term as Honors Director, he sought to forge connections between the humanities core and its "others" – the various scientific and professional studies in which our philosophical and variously ideological beliefs are expressed and often tested. He is the author of a number of articles on the philosophical groundings of contemporary views on education and childhood, and co-author, along with David Jelinek, of *Filmed School: Desire, Transgression, and the Filmic Fantasy of Pedagogy* (Routledge, 2016).

Kim Paffenroth, Religious Studies
Director, 2014 –

Kim Paffenroth taught in the Core Humanities Program at Villanova University before coming to Iona in 2001. His Ph.D. is from the University of Notre Dame, where he specialized in New Testament studies. Previously he earned degrees at Harvard Divinity School and St. John's College (Annapolis). He has published widely on topics related to the New Testament and St. Augustine, as well as the expression of religious themes in popular culture. In that area, his best known work is *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth* (Baylor University Press, 2006), which won the Bram Stoker Award and Foreword Magazine's Book of the Year Silver Medal.

Final Thoughts from Kim Paffenroth, Director of the Honors Program: Excerpts from an Interview with George Pepper

I never met George Pepper, a longtime professor at Iona and instrumental in the development of the Honors Program. But as I was researching the history of ICHP, I was intrigued and humbled by his achievements, and I thought these reflections of his on academia, philosophy, and pedagogy, epitomized the Program and the people in it. (It is taken from George J. Walters, "An Interview with George B. Pepper," in H. Wautischer, A. M. Olson, and G. J. Walters, editors, *Philosophical Faith and the Future of Humanity* [Dodrecht et al.: Springer, 2012] 45-52; reprinted here with permission.) It seemed especially appropriate to end with the ideas of a person from the program, rather than comments on the structure or content of the program. And for that, Dr. Pepper seemed a perfect example of what we do in Honors, for in these few words, he shows the breadth of knowledge and the sense of wonder we try to inculcate in our students, as he skips

deftly and with such palpable excitement from Socrates to Augustine to Nietzsche to Kierkegaard – authors with whom we and our students still wrestle. And it is also thrilling how Dr. Pepper, at the very end of his life, still breathes out the kind of passion and curiosity our freshmen evince, year after year, as he shows the deep bonds between ideas and “real life,” the connections which we and our students renew and foster in both our scholarship and service. The spirit he shows here is simultaneously the goal and the foundation of our Program. It truly is how we see ourselves as called to “Move the World,” and “Fight the Good Fight,” and I am honored to share it with you – not as the end of this history of the Iona College Honors Program, but as a segue into the chapters that are being written now, and will be written in the future.

Gregory J. Walters (GJW): George, you had a successful academic career teaching philosophy at Iona College (New Rochelle, New York). What role did Jaspers’ philosophy play in your own teaching and philosophical thinking?

George B. Pepper (GBP): Jaspers’ philosophy helped me bring together much of the Western philosophical tradition. I most frequently taught Plato and Socrates. Jaspers’ philosophy became especially important to me when, as chair of the philosophy department, I began teaching an upper division seminar on “Contemporary Philosophy.”....

GJW: From where do you take your classical philosophical inspiration? Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, the Pre-Socratics?

GBP: It was not so much Plato as Socrates, and his wisdom in the statement “know thyself.” Man must dialogue with oneself. No matter what one learns, and no matter whoever says it, philosophy is commissioned to question critically and to be responsible in and for the world. Philosophy challenges us: How can I expose falsehood? How do I bring thinking and acting together? Europeans who did not stand up to Nazi Germany when they could have is a case in point. The human being is not able, nor willing, to stand up against and to confront the great evils of time, unless one is a person that dialogues with the self....

GJW: What is the truth of the matter given your *prima facie* reading of the text? [Referring to a paper given the previous year by Leonard H. Ehrlich and printed in the same volume as the interview.]

GBP: Now look, the paper is a great *apologia* of the evils of his time. Leonard is offering an explanation of the Holocaust: how it came about and how it can be avoided. He relies on Jaspers’ theory of truth to do this. In passing, he takes some swipes against the Church, especially, Galileo Galilee and Giordano Bruno, but he misses some things here. There is no mention of Augustine, for example, who is pivotal in Western philosophy to an important understanding of the politics-religion relationship. I refer to his work on the *City of God*. Many Neo-Kantians rightly see the importance of Augustine as revealing the clear limits of the state. The fact that Galileo is so prominently displayed as an example

of church oppression ignores all the seventeenth century literature surrounding those who defended Galileo against the Church's condemnation....

GJW: Ethical vigilance and wakefulness in response to violations of human rights, especially the human rights of women and children, seem a tall order of our current historic economic and political situation. Nietzsche rejected rights language on the grounds of herd morality and his critique of equality, and Kierkegaard rejects the aesthetic stage of life that characterized his age. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, those oh so great disturbers of Modernity, are central to Jaspers' understanding of the sea-change shifts that took place in nineteenth century European philosophy. Who had the most significant influence on Jaspers?

GBP: It would take more time to discuss this question. We have Nietzsche, the supreme atheist, and, Kierkegaard, the supreme theologian and religious philosopher; they provide unique expressions of the importance of reflection for authentic selfhood. What is most significant is the depths of selfhood they painfully plumbed. What did they discover? The subject cannot penetrate the self, in spite of the most extreme rationality. Religious, secular, other organizations today are still attempting to define selfhood. And yet, they all, and always, come up short. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard understood this. Jaspers saw in these two philosophers the voice of modern selfhood.

Acknowledgments

This history was gleaned from old issues of *The Ionian*, usefully digitized and put online under the direction of the Director of Libraries at Iona College, Rick Palladino. Serials Librarian, Valerie Masone, was the project manager. Other information was found in old college catalogs, made available at the library by Ed Helmrich (who also provided books via inter-library loan), and Natalka Sawchuk, and at the Registrar's office by Alexis Yusov; this part of the research was conducted by the Assistant to the Director of the Honors Program, Charlotte Wray. Rick Palladino also formatted the photographs that we have included. My thanks to all who have assisted in this project, helping to preserve our heritage for future generations.