Director’s Welcome

Dr. Suma Datta, Executive Director, LAUNCH

Howdy! And welcome to our first iteration of the University Honors newsletter from our new administrative location as part of the LAUNCH (Learning communities, Academic excellence, Undergraduate research, National fellowships, Capstones, and Honors) unit at Texas A&M. The past few years have brought many changes, hopefully for the better as we have listened to what you, our former Honors students, have said about your experiences here at Texas A&M and in the Lechner and McFadden residence halls. We have also been discussing the evolution of Honors with colleagues at the top universities in the country. Synthesizing all of this together into a coherent whole is a challenge, but one we at Honors thrive on!

I’m sure you’ll be happy to know that many of the things you loved are still in place—the Honors residences for incoming Freshmen are still Lechner and McFadden, we still have an active, engaged first year living, learning community, and the Honors courses that foster a close relationship with professors are still being taught all over campus...

Continued on pg. 3

“We’ve taken your feedback to heart...to help students develop personal and professional skills as well as their academic ones.”

- Dr. Suma Datta

In This Issue
- Director’s Welcome
- MSC Italy Trip
- Honors Housing Community
- National Fellowships
- Undergraduate Research
- Honors Student Council
Italy Trip

By Ryan Trantham ’15, 65th MSC President

As an incoming freshman, I was fortunate to be able to participate in the annual “Italy Trip”—a journey that proved to be one of the most formative experiences of my life. The Champe Fitzhugh International Honors Leadership Seminar, as it is formally known, is a program jointly administered by the MSC Director’s Office and LAUNCH Office at A&M. Since 1992, the Italy Trip has sent some of the best and brightest incoming freshmen on a journey designed to incubate their leadership skills, intercultural competencies, and to kick-start their growth and development while a student at TAMU.

While the goals of this trip haven’t changed throughout the years, the program is always adapting to better serve the students who are selected to attend. Although the Italy Fish have always had their home base as the city of Castiglion Fiorentino, throughout the years the trip has selected other cities as travelling points. Today, the trip sends students to Florence, Arezzo, Cortona, Assisi, Rome, and Venice. In these cities, the activities have also changed from year to year. For example, in Florence, lines at the Uffizi Gallery have nearly tripled in length. Instead of taking a group tour, students are instead encouraged to visit in small groups on their free day in Florence and instead take a group tour of the Science Museum, which is curated by a professor who frequently lectures at Santa Chiara. Students also can elect to take a cooking class in a Tuscan vineyard and travel to Lago Trasimene, the site of Hannibal’s devastating ambush of the Roman Army. In a place as rich in culture and history as Italy, there will always be great opportunities for the Italy Fish.

Continued on pg. 4

Honors Housing Community

By Reagan Puckett ’17, Junior Advisor

As Howdy Week approaches, close to 400 excited freshman have already started to pack up their things, practice their wildcats (for freshman not an all together too complicated task), and, of course, started to have the requisite anxiety about starting college.

The Sophomore Advisor team has their own anxiety, as they have been eagerly awaiting the opportunity to discover exactly who their children are, how many have the same major as they do, and just how many of their kids’ majors they’ll have to Google. Everyone has their family names selected, door decs made, and with any luck have been training all summer to move fridges up to the fourth floor because, as everyone knows, each fourth floor room...

Continued on pg. 3
The best things are being improved and extended to more of our Honors students. All University Honors freshmen are now required to live in Lechner or McFadden to help build that sense of Honors community. All University Honors students are required to engage in a capstone experience (which many of you may remember as undergraduate research) which can now take the shape of a junior or senior undergraduate research thesis, a community service project, a leadership project, or a teaching project. This allows our students to tailor their capstone experience to their life goals, interests, and majors. University Honors students continue to meet after the freshman year at events run by the Honors Student Council or overseen by Honors staff. These events range from social activities to intellectual discussions with visiting speakers, and we are planning a mentoring network that will connect current Honors students to you, our Honors Former Students! If you are interested in being one of our featured speakers, or giving back as a mentor to a current Honors student, please let us know! (honors@tamu.edu)

We’ve added some new wrinkles to University Honors in the shape of ePortfolios, a kind of electronic resume that the students can mine as they write fellowship essays, applications for internships, jobs, or post-graduate work, and to keep in touch with their fellow Honors students as they graduate and move on. We’ve also taken your feedback to heart, and re-imagined the first year Honors Housing Community seminar as a platform to help students develop personal and professional skills as well as their academic ones. We hope that by having our freshmen focus on understanding how to weave together their values and life goals while improving their communication skills, that intellectual power they come to us with will be successfully put to use upholding those values that A&M holds so dear. We’re excited that our approach has received a lot of attention from Honors programs at other institutions who seek to emulate our example! In fact, the energy in University Honors appears to have infected the whole of campus, as the number of College and Departmental Honors programs has grown considerably and harmoniously such that students can participate in multiple programs with requirements for more specialized programs also counting towards achievement of the University Honors distinction.

Once school begins, our family meetings start in full swing. These hour long meetings are a cornerstone of the current program and each week the SA parent and their family will meet for discussion about personal values, current events, and long-term plans. These family meetings give parents not only the opportunity to help students to think outside the box and discuss real world topics (the sort you won’t find in Gen Chem), but also the ability to touch base once a week with their kids and do the “parenting” side of being an SA parent.

Even though we won’t begin planning—much less building—until spring, we’ll hit the ground running this fall to raise funds for the next Shack-a-Thon. The Honors Housing Community proudly continues to dominate fundraising for the campus Habitat for Humanity fundraiser to get a double plot for building. Each year Shack stands as a prime example of just what we Honors students can accomplish when we all band together to build and take-down our shack in just a few hours. Our biggest fundraising function for last year’s endeavor was our dorm’s formal...
Unfortunately, the Italy Trip has also been impacted by the loss of two individuals who made the trip even more special for those who had the chance to meet them. Paolo Barucchieri, whose final year with the trip was my freshman year (2011), was the director of TAMU’s study abroad programs in Italy for many years. His genuine passion for the beautiful culture of Italy was contagious and truly irreplaceable. Today’s trip utilizes local tour guides to help teach students about the art and architecture they are encountering, but Paolo’s storytelling is sorely missed. Additionally, Jane Bailey, a longtime MSC staff member and staff leader for the trip, also passed away in 2013. Jane was a mentor to countless students from the trip and within the MSC, and impacted the personal and professional lives of so many students—myself included.

The 2015 Italy trip, in many respects, looked quite different than the trip I experienced in 2011. I’m sure the same can be said for any two trips throughout the years. Despite these constant changes, the trip has remained a wonderful and enlightening experience for the students who spend those three weeks in Italy.
Sidebar Story

Headline

Sidebars complement a main article. Use them when you want to keep your main articles direct and information packed, but you still want to share extra or supplementary content.

For example, if your main story is about your new building plans, consider using the sidebar to talk about the history of the land plot, or to tell a story of your first encounter with the property.

National Fellowships Update

By Adelia Humme ‘15, National Fellowships Coordinator

National Fellowships season – the time of year when students submit applications for nationally competitive awards like the Rhodes, Fulbright, and Marshall scholarships – is in full swing. The journey to a submission deadline is intensive; some students compare it to adding a full course to their schedules. Why is the process of collecting letters of recommendation, contacting universities or research institutions abroad, and revising essays (sometimes up to nine times!) worth it for these students? Although the obvious reason is to pursue funding for graduate school or post-grad research, students also benefit from the application process itself. As Hunter Hampton ’16, a double major in Economics and International Studies, explains, “Going through the process of applying for the Rhodes Scholarship clarified my goals in ways that a less methodical, less formalized process never would have been able to.”

From each step of the fellowship process, applicants gain skills in self-reflection, communication, and goal development. In their meetings with me, students discuss the events that motivated them to pursue their chosen academic fields, the research topics they will study in graduate school, and the principles that shape their studies and extracurricular involvement. I seek to understand what applicants want to accomplish with their lives and then guide them in expressing those ideals in their written work...

Continued on pg. 6
Honors Student Council

By Joshua Fuller ‘17, President of Honors Student Council

Honors Student Council (HSC) prides itself in fostering community among high achieving students. Once freshmen move out of the dorms of the Honors Housing Community and students become increasingly more specialized in their own disciplines, Honors believes that there needs to be an apparatus to bring these students back together in interdisciplinary academic and non-academic settings. The events and work HSC does is exactly this apparatus.

Starting early in the year, one of HSC’s most well known series, Donuts and Discussion, gets rolling. Sometimes it can be intimidating talking to professors about research, so the awesome thing about D&D (no… not Dungeons and Dragons) is that this event series brings in distinguished undergraduate researchers from various fields around the university to talk about their research and the process of how to get involved with research at Texas A&M. Topics have spanned the search for an anti-pathology vaccine for Schistosomiasis to archeological digs in the Middle East.

Starting in 2014, HSC has put on a large “panel-style” event each year that features faculty members or students who talk about very important issues in our world using their expertise and experiences. The inaugural panel was entitled “Women in STEM” and featured 6 distinguished professors from around the university who had encountered various challenges in STEM and academia because of their sex. This panel’s goal was to encourage students to pursue their passions and break down the sex barrier. This year’s panel was entitled “Mental Health and Honors Education” and featured students, staff, and the director of the Student Counseling Services at Texas A&M. The panel discussed the stigma that exists surrounding mental illness and mental distress in the honors community and the community at large with the false dichotomy between mental illness and hope of challenging this stigma, as well as the success. The discussion was, personally, one of my most meaningful experiences at A&M because of the vulnerability I experienced as a panelist, but more importantly the visible impact the talk had on many students’ lives…

Continued pg. 7
The Honors Undergraduate Research Fellows program was significantly bolstered by the merging of Honors with the office of Undergraduate Research in the fall of 2010. Since then, the new undergraduate research thesis program, called the Undergraduate Research Scholars (URS) program, has grown from about 50 students in the Fall of 2010 to 265 who began their research this fall. In a typical year, approximately 25% of Research Scholars are Honors students. The URS Program is an Honors distinction highlighted on a student’s transcript and in the graduation program. Students who successfully complete the URS Program also earn the right to wear the URS medallion during their graduation ceremony.

LAUNCH selects two best thesis award winners for the URS Program each year. Of the more than 170 who finished in May of 2015 Connor Aimone, a senior in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, won best thesis in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) category. Aimone’s project involved creating and testing mathematical models for integrating renewable energy sources such as wind or solar power reliably into the infrastructure of the national energy grid. His results will minimize power grid “crashes” that leave whole communities without power. The 2015 best thesis winner in Humanities, Arts, and Social Science was Susannah Barr, a senior in the Department of Anthropology. Barr investigated the assumptions she and her three friends had made when they founded Project Sunflower, a small aid organization dedicated to children’s health and nutrition in the rural Dominican Republic. Her studies of the needs and preferences of the community allowed her to make critical improvements in Project Sunflower that will have an enormous impact.

As you can see, undergraduate research at Texas A&M has come a long way since the days of a mere handful of students completing the Honors Undergraduate Research Fellows program. And many more exciting things are under development!*

Dr. MacKenzie returned to his faculty role in the Department of Biology in Fall 2016, where he will oversee their departmental Honors program. Our new Associate Director for Undergraduate Research is Dr. Sarah Misemer.

HSC has worked this year to create new service opportunities for students. Our partnerships with the Bryan Animal Shelter and local schools are allowing students to volunteer with HSC to make a meaningful impact in the community.

We don’t want everything to be too serious, though! Starting in 2014, HSC has hosted two tailgates before football games! Students love coming out to get free food and socialize before the Ags BTHO whoever we are playing that week (or throw 5 interceptions, “sigh!”). We also have hosted events like “Drunk Goggles Mariokart” that allows students to play Mariokart while using drunk goggles from the police department—an amusing testament to the reasons we should not drink and drive.

I look forward to the continued work of HSC in bringing together the best and the brightest students this University has to offer! ☺
Honors Former Students

The heart of the Honors experience at Texas A&M is the community of bright and motivated students from all disciplines who self-select to the additional challenge that Honors brings. We are indebted to countless generations of Honors students who have established the traditions, standards, and expectations that make the University Honors Program what it is today.

You can continue to play a role in the Honors community by sharing your stories with current students. Your examples are particularly helpful in illustrating the long-term benefit of Honors as part of the undergraduate experience. If you plan to be on campus and would like to visit with current students, please let us know. If you’d like to share your story on our blog, we’d love to host it! Check out examples at http://tx.ag/HFSS.

We are also working with the Association of Former Students to establish an affinity network of Honors Former Students as a way for you to maintain your Honors connections as you grow in your career, as well as to contribute to the experience of current Honors students through gifts of your time, talent, and treasure. If you are interested in making any kind of gift to the University Honors Program, we’d be happy to discuss the kind of impact you want to make!

LAUNCH: Honors
114 Henderson Hall
TAMU 4233
College Station, TX 77843-4233

(979) 845-1957
honors@tamu.edu
Visit us on the web at honors.tamu.edu

Personal, professional, and intellectual growth through interdisciplinary community.

Contact Us

Do you have a prospective student that you’d like us to talk with? Want to see how you can contribute back to the Honors community at Texas A&M?

LAUNCH: Honors
114 Henderson Hall
TAMU 4233
College Station, TX 77843-4233

(979) 845-1957
honors@tamu.edu
Visit us on the web at honors.tamu.edu

From Promise to Achievement