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"A CULTURE OF ITS OWN": THE STORY OF THE SALLY MCDONNELL BARKSDALE
HONORS COLLEGE

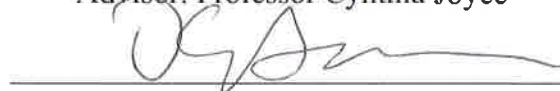
by
Mary Boyte

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
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Approved by


Advisor: Professor Cynthia Joyce



Reader: Dr. Darren Grem



Reader: Dr. John Samonds

ABSTRACT

MARY BOYTE: “A Culture of its Own”: The Story of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College
(Under the direction of Cynthia Joyce)

Since its inception in 1996, the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College has created a culture of striving for academic excellence which is constantly shifting. At its core is the desire to educate students who learn for the sake of learning. Through small, seminar-style classes, students discuss broad questions that take them beyond the walls of the SMBHC. This thesis paints a complete narrative of Ole Miss’ honors education, starting with the Scholar’s Program in 1952 and ending in the spring semester of 2023. In addition to offering a factual history, this thesis also explores what sets an honors course apart from a standard course. This dual focus allows a glimpse into the honors experience at Ole Miss.

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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis recounts the history of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College from its inception in 1997 to its current state in 2023. Over the past twenty-five years, the SMBHC has, in the words of former Associate Dean Debra Young, created a “culture of its own,” one that is “self-sustaining” and “self-evolving.”

Using primary and secondary sources to form a timeline and general narrative, and oral histories to amplify the voices of students, professors, and deans, I explore this culture.

The first American honors program began in 1922 at Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. Frank Aydelotte created a system of small, seminar-style classes in which students discussed readings in small groups with one professor. One hundred years later, the SMBHC still emulates this model with its seminar-style courses.

Since the creation of the Scholar’s Program in 1953, Ole Miss’ honors education has been evolving into what is seen today: a college of over 1,600 citizen scholars aiming to fulfill the SMBHC’s mission statement describing students “fired by the life of the mind, committed to the public good, and driven to find solutions.” In 1996, the SMBHC overtook the Honors Program, which was adapted from the Scholars Program in 1982, with the goal of keeping Mississippi’s top students in the state. The “brain drain” in Mississippi continues today, with the state losing over 60,000 millennials since 2010 (White 2).

In the mid-’90s, when Robert Khayat became chancellor of Ole Miss, he set out to create a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, the oldest and one of the most prestigious honors societies in the U.S. After meeting in Washington D.C. with Doug Ford, then chief of executive office of Phi Beta Kappa, a plan emerged with two main objectives: get rid of the Confederate flag at football games, and create an honors college- a separate institution- to replace the Honors Program which

had existed since 1982. In 1996, Khayat requested funds for the new college from long-time friend Jim Barksdale, CEO of Netscape and Scholars Program class of 1962 alumnus. Barksdale and his wife, fellow Scholars Program alumna Sally McDonnell-Barksdale, donated \$5.4 million, the largest donation in Ole Miss' history at the time. In the fall of 1997, the first honors scholars stepped through the doors of the newly converted former sorority house, then named the McDonnell-Barksdale Honors College. One renovation and thousands of students later, the building still stands as a home for honors education at the University of Mississippi.

After a quarter of a century, it's worth taking a closer look at the journey of the SMBHC. Throughout the past twenty-five years, the SMBHC has been host to countless educational experiences, from convocation speakers such as Elie Wiesel to freshman venture programs to major cities across the U.S. to senior capstone projects covering topics ranging from moving the Confederate statue on campus to nuclear energy as a sustainable source. All the while, the college maintained a reputation as a private college experience within the financial and social context of a public university.

The Report of the Honors Curriculum Planning Committee, typed in 1996, states:

“The Honors College is designed to attract, educate, and retain the state's brightest students. Many of Mississippi's most talented students leave the state after high school never to return. The Honors College's program will offer similar academic opportunities to those of prestigious private universities that currently attract many of the state's best students. By keeping these students in Mississippi and by providing them with the best education possible, we ensure that Mississippi can retain a talented professional workforce.”

In Mississippi, which often ranks extremely low in education, this was no small feat. The journey came with roadblocks. Early on, many department faculty members feared an honors

college with separate classes would create an elitist divide between students in honors sections and non-honors sections.

A full history of the SMBHC does not come from enrollment numbers and financial statements. It comes from the memories and anecdotes of those who have walked through its hallways, discussed difficult topics in the fish bowl room, crammed for a test in the dungeon study room, and chatted by the koi pond. The purpose of this thesis, subtitled “The Story of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College” rather than “The History of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College,” is to seek out the people who have memories of the honors college, ask them about their experiences, and tell their stories.

Research

Most of the history compiled comes from primary sources provided by John Samonds, associate dean, and Penny Leeton, program manager. Sources include emails, letters, financial statements, public relations documents, photos, and reports from the academic year of 1952-1953 onward.

Core sources are kept separate and include documents that are foundational to the SMBHC’s story. These sources include *The Report of the Honors College Curriculum Planning Committee*, typed in 1996 by Fred Laurenzo, chair of the Honors Curriculum Planning Committee, and *A Proposal to James L. and Sally M. Barksdale for the Endowment of The Honors College*, created by Robert Khayat, Gerald Walton, and Carolyn Staton in April of 1996.

Interviews will be woven into the information from historical documents to create a cohesive narrative. Interviews conducted include Jennifer Parsons, associate dean for communications (May 5, 2022); Douglass Sullivan-González, former dean of the college (May 6, 2022); Robert Khayat, former chancellor of Ole Miss (May 9, 2022); Fred Laurenzo, chair of

the Honors Curriculum Planning Committee, (June 16, 2022); Debra Young, former associate dean (July 22, 2022); Kenneth Sufka, member of the Honors Curriculum Planning Committee and honors professor (August 18, 2022); Elizabeth Payne, first director (January 16, 2023 over email); Timothy Yenter, associate dean for capstone (February 7, 2023); Robert Brown, honors professor (February 14, 2023); Mary Thurlkill, honors professor (March 7, 2023); John Samonds, associate dean (March 20, 2023); and Ethel Scurlock, current dean (March 29, 2023).

PART ONE: THE EVOLUTION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI'S HONORS
EDUCATION

CHAPTER ONE: SCHOLARS PROGRAM TO HONORS PROGRAM: PRECURSOR TO THE COLLEGE

The conception of Ole Miss' honors history dates back to 1952 with the emergence of the University Scholars Program, originally called Faulkner's Scholars Program (Clay). The program, funded by the General Education Board, was originally exclusive to the College of Liberal Arts. In August of 1975, George Everett, the director of the Honors Program, sent out inquiries along with a brochure of the current Honors Program to several alumni that had been in the inaugural class of the Scholar's Program in 1952. He wanted to know what they were up to now that twenty years had come to pass and possibly solicit some donations (Everett). Self-described "charter member" of the Scholars Program Rosemary Landon wrote back. In typewriter ink dated August 27, 1975, Landon's letter states,

"Dear Dr. Everett: I was genuinely pleased to receive your letter and the brochure about the Scholars Program. If I recall correctly, my freshman class (entering the U. of Miss. in September, 1952) was the first to participate in the program; so as a 'charter member' I was delighted to know that the program is alive and well and flourishing" (Landon).

Landon, then known as Rosemary Stephens, speaks of the program in a grateful tone. She goes on to say,

"I have many fond memories of my fellow students in the program; and I shall always be grateful for the enrichment that the program gave me. Let's face it--the U. of Miss. in the early '50s, while an oasis in the Mississippi desert, was not exactly the intellectual navel of the world. Being somewhat of a misfit in the world of football players and sorority queens, I found myself included in a nucleus of other 'oddballs' who yearned for

something beyond the borders of the state--and, strangely, almost all of us were members of the Scholars Program” (Landon).

Further down in her letter, Landon tells Everett that she has kept in touch with one fellow scholar named Ruth Jackson, formally Ruth Cleland, of Sardis, Mississippi. She calls Jackson her best friend, stating, “Over the years we have corresponded and evolved in such similar ways that our friendship has transcended time, distance, and different lifestyles” (Landon). Ruth Jackson was among the three names filed away with the original inquiry from Everett. Jackson’s response did not mirror the glowing review given by her best friend. Her typewriter-composed letter, dated September 12, 1975, is strikingly brief compared to the two pages Landon wrote. Jackson’s candid letter closes its introductory paragraph with the sentence “I did have some enlightening private instruction from my favorite professor (of music theory), but otherwise I received little benefit from the Scholars Program during my two years at Ole Miss” (Jackson). Jackson had come to the conclusion that there was actually very little need for an elite program for so-called “gifted” students. She wrote,

“All anyone connected with the program seemed to be sure of was that some people wanted to do something to enrich the educational development of a group of supposedly ‘gifted’ students. I have learned from experience that there is not necessarily a correlation between high test scores (or grade point averages) and giftedness. Many gifted students are not apt test-takers; many apt test-takers are not gifted people. But I am glad to see from the brochure that the program has grown in both its scope and its organization” (Jackson).

In 1974, the University Scholars Program was expanded into the University Honors Program. The Honors Program, unlike the Scholar’s program, included the entirety of Ole Miss

majors. The program did not include a physical college or specialized courses. Instead, it offered students additional work in standard classes in order to earn an honors status upon graduation. In a small informational booklet originally put together by the 1986-1987 Honors Senate, and thereafter revised for the 1990-1991 and the 1993-1994 Honors Program, the quintessential Ole Miss honors student is described as such:

“An ideal graduate of the Honors Program is one who has explored realms beyond the mere requirements of the degree, nourishing the life-long process of what in German is called *Bildung*- the intellectual, emotional, and moral shaping of the total self” (Clay 4.)

On the front page of the slightly yellowed booklet, in dark blue ink presumably faded from its former black shine, there is a tree. Hand-drawn branches are entangled with two banners reading “Literatura, Scientia, Mathematica, Musica, Ars, Historia.” The trunk, which splits the title “Honors Program,” ends in a pattern of roots, holding another banner displaying the phrase “From knowledge to wisdom through understanding.” Spending some time observing this cover, readers pick up the allusion: at the root of an honors program is the ability to gain wisdom through an understanding not found in typical classes; through this sprouts a deeper knowledge of the six disciplines of literature, science, math, music, art, and history.

The University Honors Program gave way to the updated Honors Program in 1982, shifting the program into an independent unit. It took only the top 2% of the undergraduate student body, which at the time denoted about 75 students. These students were described as having “merit, motivation, character, the ability and willingness to study and learn independently, demonstrated writing skill, and leadership potential” (Item 4.1). Dr. George Everett served as director. Applications included high school class rank, standardized test scores, letters of recommendation, and a personal letter. The Admissions and Retention Committee,

under the direction of Everett, deliberated over applications and regularly reviewed admitted students' progress, and dismissed those who did not meet requirements. Unlike its predecessor, the new program included exclusive honors courses, which were submitted by faculty from different disciplines and approved by the Curriculum Committee. Much like today's honors courses, Honors Program classes "were designed to be kept small, to encourage discussion and student participation and to permit more student-faculty interaction" (Item 4.1). These classes are not intimidating, as the booklet alleviates potentially wary students: "Such sections should not be viewed as 'harder,' for they will offer a better environment for learning and consequently spark interest" (Clay 11).

Familiar to modern honors students was the inclusion of Honors 101 and 102. Additional honors courses included honors sections of lower-level courses, and a series of courses- Honors 301, 302, 401, and 402- during which students worked on independent projects. Regular courses continued to provide an integrated honors section characterized by additional work. In the absence of an honors section, a student and professor could fill out an "honors contract" so the student received an "H" on their transcript. Students were required to complete twenty-four hours of honors credit in order to graduate with the program's distinction. Benefits of the program included access to an exclusive Honors Center open 24/7. In addition, there was a study room in the J.D. Williams library set aside for those in the program. Honors students also enjoyed the privilege to secure dorm rooms on "guaranteed quiet floors found in major dorms" (Clay 19).

George Everett served as director of the Honors Program- both its old and updated versions- until the word "college" replaced "program" in 1996. Everett was seen as more than a

manager. At the bottom of the “Faculty and Staff” page of the booklet, “Dr. E”, as he was affectionately called by students, is described as such:

“As Director, Dr. Everett has authority over all decisions made and actions taken by the Honors Program. He also advises students about the aspects of University life and acts as liaison between Honors students and University officials. When problems arise, Dr. Everett is available to cut through the red tape; he is both administrator and counselor” (Clay 15).

Today, the SMBHC, even with its new building, sits on the foundation of the Scholars and Honors Programs.

CHAPTER TWO: ROBERT KHAYAT'S VISION: THE STEPS TO PHI BETA KAPPA

In 1995, Robert Khayat was appointed chancellor of the University of Mississippi. He stepped into his new role carrying a dream to turn Ole Miss into an elite university. In an interview on May 9, 2023, Khayat said he believes that the responsibility of a leader is “to have a vision, to know where you want to go, and to know what you want the organization to be.” He said from the moment he became chancellor, he wanted the students to have a “top-of-the-line experience.” His job was to “help chart a path to reach standing in the higher education community nationally” (Khayat). Khayat wanted to shift a narrative of the South that had been perpetuated for decades:

“For too long we'd been labeled the rebels, and confederate flags, and racial problems and poor, not enough money, and just one negative after another. And I just said... that's just not the way it is. We've got all those challenges, but we have all that success to go with it” (Khayat).

When the university was passed into Khayat's hands, he was gifted the challenge of a declining student population. According to Khayat, between the years 1990-1995, the university lost around one thousand students. One of his first decisions in office was to hire the public relations firm Burson-Marsteller to survey regions from Louisiana up to Ohio, and from Virginia up the East Coast in order to determine what people thought of Ole Miss. Khayat got his answer: “We don't think of you” (Khayat). A *Daily Journal* article published in 1997 quotes Harold Burson, the founder of the firm and 1940 Ole Miss graduate, as saying, “The overwhelming majority had no opinion or were unfamiliar with Ole Miss” (Elkins). This utter lack of interest led to a subsequent lack of private funding. The five principal areas of funding for a public university, according to Khayat, are state appropriation, tuition, auxiliary services such as the

campus bookstore, research grants, and private support. “You have to do well in all five of those areas in order to provide the funding that you need to have a vital organization” (Khayat).

Khayat’s main pathway to the desired elite status relied on the creation of a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. According to Khayat, because of the multitude of negative stereotypes, Ole Miss had never gotten the chance to hold its own chapter. Soon after becoming chancellor, Khayat went to Washington D.C. to speak with then chief of executive office of Phi Beta Kappa, Douglas Ford. Ford gave Khayat a list of potential ways to turn Ole Miss into a university that could support a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. Khayat made two of these suggestions the focus of his two-fold plan. The first part involved banning the confederate flag from the campus. The Burson-Marsteller survey concluded that one thing people from other regions did associate Ole Miss with was the confederate flag and its racist history. “One of the things that (the survey) showed was that the confederate flag was creating a sense about us, that we were racist and backward and still in the past. And, you know, I had grown up with the flag being part of Ole Miss' life, but I never thought about it from a racial perspective, but we thought about then” (Khayat). The decision to get rid of the flag on campus garnered national news coverage. An article published in the Washington Post on October 5, 1977 states,

“The primary purpose of the survey, according to the chancellor, was to provide guidance on how to strengthen the school's academic reputation -- one of Khayat's goals is to obtain a Phi Beta Kappa chapter. But it quickly turned into what Khayat conceded was ‘a divisive discussion about symbols and mascots,’ with traditionalists accusing the administration of trying to manufacture reasons why the symbols should be jettisoned” (Baker).

The second part of Khayat's plan was the institution of an honors college. Even before he officially became chancellor, Khayat was involved in talks about an honors college and a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa being added to Ole Miss. A record from an April 4, 1994 meeting in the boardroom of the Lyceum in which Robert Khayat was present lists on its "brainstorming" topics a "true Honors program/college" and "Phi Beta Kappa chapter." The university would need money to cover both the flag issue and the new college. Khayat looked to the Barksdales to accomplish the latter. Khayat had known Jim Barksdale since he was a child. "I'd known him when he was a little boy and I was playing football at Ole Miss, and he would come up here with his daddy and his older brothers, and they'd play around in the alumni house coffee shop while his daddy would drink coffee and talk to his colleagues" (Khayat). Now in 1996, Barksdale was a wealthy businessman with stocks in Netscape living in Palo Alto with his wife Sally. Khayat called Barksdale with the idea. Soon, Khayat and three of Barksdale's brothers flew out to Palo Alto to visit Jim and Sally for the weekend. On Sunday morning, around 11:00, Barksdale asked Khayat what he wanted him to do. "I said, 'we need an honors college'. Well, if we're going to be what we want to be, we have to attract the best students to get the best students. You have to offer them something extraordinary. An honors college can be extraordinary." Barksdale replied, "'Why don't you go back to Oxford and send us a letter'" (Khayat).

The letter turned into a twenty-six-page proposal thoroughly describing Khayat's vision for the honors college. Khayat enlisted the aid of Gerald Walton, dean of Liberal Arts, and Associate Provost Carolyn Staton to co-write the document. The opening line sums up their vision: "The Honors College offers challenging and unique educational opportunities to academically talented students" (Khayat, Staton, and Walton). The potential college promised exclusive courses that would expose admitted students to "the highest form of critical thinking in

the sciences, humanities, arts, mathematics, and social sciences” (Khayat, Staton, and Walton). It promised “specialized courses,” access to a private computer lab, and “collaborative” classrooms. In addition, the document proposed, “The Honors College exposes the students to cultural activities both on and off campus and to experiences which many of them may never have had, such as opera, art exhibits, and so forth” (Khayat, Staton, and Walton).

In April of 1996, Khayat presented the proposal to the Barksdales. The Barksdales proceeded to donate \$5,432,000 to start the college- the largest private donation in the university’s history at the time. On May 11, 1996, Chancellor Khayat announced the new McDonnell-Barksdale Honors College during his commencement speech. He stated,

“Their gift of \$5.4 million will provide opportunities for honors students and faculty unsurpassed in American higher education. Today, we gratefully and proudly announce the creation of the McDonnell-Barksdale Honors College at the University of Mississippi” (Khayat).

CHAPTER THREE: BRINGING THE COLLEGE TO LIFE: FROM PLANNING COMMITTEES TO OPENING DAY

On May 23, 1996, the Honors College Curriculum Planning Committee, appointed by Staton, held its inaugural meeting. Committee members included Dr. Andrew Cooksy, Dr. Gay Hatfield, Dr. Michael Lynch, Dr. Tyrus McCarty, Dr. Gary Miller, Ms. Martha Hutchinson, Dr. Natalie Schroeder, Dr. Robert Sindelar, Dr. Kenneth Sufka, Dr. John Winkle, and Dr. Fred Lorenzo, who served as chair. The group held weekly meetings thereafter throughout the summer of 1996. In an interview on June 16, 2022, Lorenzo described the group as a “good committee committed to excellent undergraduate education” (Lorenzo). The committee, according to Lorenzo, used Khayat’s original proposal as a guiding light. The result of those summer meetings was the nineteen-page *Report of the Honors College Curriculum Planning Committee* typed up by Lorenzo. The opening sentence of the second paragraph states that the proposed curriculum was based on the “University’s three-fold mission of instruction, research, and service.” It states that students in the proposed college “will be given unique opportunities to participate in and benefit from all three areas of the University’s activities” (Lorenzo 1).

Initial plans included courses designed specifically for honors students taught by “full-time, tenure-track members of the faculty” (Lorenzo 1). The curriculum was laid out: a minimum of twenty-nine hours of honors credit including six hours of a first-year seminar, two hours of a first-year computer lab, six hours of sophomore English, and three hours of a senior thesis course. Today, the SMBHC curriculum bears little resemblance to its blueprint. Students in 2023 are required to fulfill thirty hours of honors credit. After six hours of a first-year seminar, there are no required courses during an honors student’s sophomore or senior year, except for a thesis or capstone project. The current absence of a first-year computer lab reflects the evolution

of technology since the conception of the honors college. There is a section in the committee planning proposal titled “Computer Proficiency Requirement” outlining the technological skills expected in an honors student. Bringing more perspective, three years before the creation of the college, the Honors Program promotional booklet proudly lists in its benefits access to a television and a VCR system. There remains a physical computer lab, which has been expanded from the original building plans of 1997. With almost every student having their own laptop, the computer lab’s current main point of intrigue is free printing services.

Other aspects outlined in the planning report persevered through the digital age. Under the section titled “Public Service,” the proposal states that each student must complete ten hours of public service each semester. This requirement remains one of the main pillars of the college today. Each semester, current honors students must complete ten “Community Action Challenge” hours in order to graduate.

The main pull of the new college was going to be the exclusive honors sections. Today, there are honors courses across almost all disciplines for SMBHC students to choose from. However, in the early years of its history, the SMBHC had difficulties drawing in all the departments. On April 19, 2000, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts Glenn Hopkins sent director Elizabeth Payne an email memo detailing each of his department’s responses to whether or not they would offer honors sections in the following fall semester. Out of the eighteen departments asked, only ten committed to offering honors sections. There was a section of the document asking the departments to list any concerns they might have over offering honors courses. The general consensus from those that declined fell into two categories: low staffing and fear of creating a divide between honors students and non-honors students. The English department replied that they would “need more faculty lines to be able to offer courses.” The art history

department said they had taught honors sections of one course and would do it again but would have to wait until the spring of 2002 and “not next spring when we have a sabbatical leave and we will need the person to pick up other art history duties.” Beyond staffing issues, some departments were concerned about the divide these restricted courses would create between their students, now sectioned into two groups. The journalism department commented in the memo that they were “concerned about segregating students into a separate section of Jour 101 in case it causes a ‘class system’,” and that they would “reconsider when (a) broader mix of students are enrolling in Journalism 101.” The chemistry department said they would offer honors sections of Chem 105 and Chem 106, but had reservations about the limited courses, citing “concerns about offering honors courses such as general chemistry, as the removal of best students lowers efforts or reamining [sic] students.” Today, some departments still do not offer honors courses, but the reasoning does not include a fear of creating a divide. John Samonds, associate dean, said that departments like pharmacy don’t offer honors courses because their style of teaching includes large classes that aren’t divisible into seminar-style classes (Samonds).

One of the most well-known features of the SMBHC is the Honors 101 and 102 courses. These classes, titled “The First-Year Honors Seminar: The Human Experience” in the committee planning proposal, have been taught since the first semester in 1997. Lorenzo described the courses as his “brainchild,” stating that out of all the ideas that came from the Honors Curriculum Planning Committee, the institution of those freshman seminars was his proudest achievement. The seminars were designed with two goals in mind: “to introduce students to the intellectual life of the university and to teach them critical thinking and critical writing” (Lorenzo). The proposal lists five goals in total, including the two that Lorenzo mentioned in the interview, splitting critical thinking and writing into two separate goals. It added two: “to

provide (students) with a solid introduction to core texts which address fundamental aspects of the human condition” and “to introduce students to a variety of interdisciplinary approaches to the questions and the texts which are the focus of the course” (Laurenzo appendix B). In short, the committee wanted these seminars to broaden students’ thinking. “What I said was, let’s think about it in terms of the big questions that human beings have asked” (Laurenzo). The committee put these big questions into four categories, which turned into four sections taught over the course of the two semesters in a freshman year. The sections, which are still used as a guide today, were laid out in the proposal as “Society and the Individual,” “Visions of the Self,” “Experience, Thought and the Natural World,” and “Self and Cosmos.” Each section is listed beside a corresponding list of questions. “Society and the Individual,” for example, includes the questions “What is the nature of a just society?” and “What is the relationship between the society and the individual?” Each of the remaining sections begs similar philosophical questions such as “Who am I?” in “Visions of the Self,” and “What is the nature of the physical universe?” in “Experience, Thought, and the Natural World.” The last unit listed in the proposal “Self and Cosmos,” delves into a more religious questioning. Questions listed beside this unit include “Is there a God?,” “What is the nature and importance of religious experience?,” and “How should we conceive of our fit into the universe as a whole?” Today, the four sections of Honors 101 and 102 have stood the test of time. Freshmen every year ask the same broad questions as those in the inaugural class of 1997.

Kenneth Sufka, member of the honors planning committee and current honors professor, recalled the committee looking at other honors programs to get ideas rolling. He said many of the existing honors programs relied on a “laundry list” of required reading. The committee wanted Ole Miss’ program to be different, moving away from a “prescribed set of books” (Sufka).

Honors 101 and 102 still involve required reading but focus more on writing and discussion rather than simply reading as many books as possible. In addition, the books honors students read often differ from the typical reading lists of other programs, according to Sufka. In the Report of the Honors Curriculum Planning Committee, there is a list of one hundred books divided by the four sections of 101 and 102 that the committee felt would fit this objective. The list ranges from H.G. Wells to Confucius to the Bible. Two of the books, Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, reappeared on my own Honors 101 and 102 syllabi in the fall of 2019 and spring of 2020. Dean Ethel Scurlock suggested *Beloved* be added to the list a few years ago, and was unaware that it was on the original list (Scurlock).

CHAPTER FOUR: DEANS: THE THREE FIGURES THAT SHAPED THE NARRATIVE

There have been three people that have overseen the honors college since its inception. In 1996, Elizabeth Payne became its first director. In 2002, Douglas Sullivan-González followed Payne in the newly created role of dean after a serving as interim dean. In 2021, Sullivan-Gonzalez retired from his position, and Ethel Scurlock stepped in as dean.

Elizabeth Payne brought over a decade of honors education experience with her on to the Ole Miss campus. She began working with honors students in 1983 at Northwestern University (Payne). She then taught at the University of Arkansas. According to former associate dean Debra Young, Payne had been “hugely successful in national scholarships” during her time in Arkansas (Young). She brought that success with her when she came to Ole Miss in 1997.

In her auto-biographical chapter of *No Straight Path: Becoming Women Historians*, Payne writes about the instant success of the honors college: “The University of Mississippi honors college was a success as soon as the doors opened. We had a Rhodes Scholar the second year, and by the fourth year we had four Truman Scholarships” (Payne 222-223). During the summer of 2000, Payne recruited historian and author Anne Firor Scott to teach an honors course titled “Parallel Lives: Black Women; White Women”. In an email to Payne dated October 20, 1999, Scott describes some of the setbacks from teaching the course. She told Payne that some black students were wary of her teaching the particular course: “After all- I grew up in the Jim Crow South and it is easy for them to believe I am therefore suspect” (Scott). Nonetheless Payne said in her chapter that one of her students described the course as “life-changing” (223). In an article published by *The Daily Mississippian* on November 4, 1997, Payne told staff writer Sarah Dill that “the students are so bright, the faculty so cooperative, and the Barksdales so generous that the only wrinkle I have is my inability to work 24 hours a day” (Dill). The article states that

Payne's goals for the honors college included adding more introductory courses and strengthening the national scholarship program.

From its first semester, the honors college has been closely tied with national scholarships. According to Young, before the SMBHC, there was no office solely focused on helping Ole Miss students obtain national scholarships. Today, the Office of National Scholarship Advisement (ONSA) remains housed on the first floor of the SMBHC. While ONSA is not exclusive to serving honors students, the honors college and national scholarships are still intertwined. This is in part due to the diligence and passion of Payne, whose influence Young described as the "shaping force for what we did with national scholarships." Young said that Payne strove to take national scholarships beyond networking: "I credit Elizabeth with making sure I understood from the go that these were not trophies. These would not be given out lightly. You didn't get them for being able to hold a champagne glass and talk." Payne wanted to ensure the students applying for these scholarships didn't have tunnel vision set on winning. She wanted them to come out a "wiser, better citizen, whatever the outcome of the scholarship application." In this way, Young said her and Payne's work on the national scholarship program "complemented the larger honors mission" (Young).

Payne described her exit from the SMBHC as disappointing. She described the circumstances of her departure in *No Straight Path*. Despite the honors college's early success, Payne was told her contract would not be renewed at the end of the fifth year. Her superior told her, "You are exhausted from giving birth to the honors college" (Payne 223). Douglass Sullivan-González stepped in partially following the recommendation of Payne to create a dean position to replace the director position.

Twenty years later, despite her bitterness over her replacement, Payne believes the honors college has done what it set out to do: “The Barksdales set out to go, and Jim and Sally knew their business” (Payne). Payne writes that upon her departure she received a photo of William Faulkner’s desk and typewriter from the honors students. The picture remains in her living room today.

In January 2003, Douglas Sullivan-González was chosen to be the first dean, fulfilling a role set by Khayat years earlier while planning the college. Khayat said in order to achieve the goals set by him and everyone else involved, it was crucial that the college draw in “really good faculty” (Khayat). According to Khayat, Carolyn Staton was able to “lure” Sullivan-González to accept the role of dean. Khayat claimed Sullivan-González was born to be the SMBHC dean, recalling he went into “gangbusters” as soon as he stepped into his new role (Khayat). Sullivan-González, known to honors students as “DSG,” served as dean until the summer semester of 2021. During those 19 years, Sullivan-González led students who, in his words, are “fired by the life of mind” (Sullivan-González).

Sullivan-González said his goal was “always to provide a community where the questions are fun and tense and challenging for students from all disciplines” (Sullivan-González). He wanted students to suggest answers to life’s questions, whether that be from the standpoint of a philosopher or an engineer or anything in between. Sullivan-González’s passion for educating Ole Miss’ honors students came from his own honors education at Samford University in Alabama. He credits the process of writing his honors thesis with shaping the person he is today. His honors education was different from that of the SMBHC. It more closely matched the former Ole Miss Honors Program. Sullivan-González participated in “contract classes” in which he completed extra work in order to receive an “H” next to the class on his transcript.

A major challenge Sullivan-González faced involved funding. For more than a decade, the college had received steady, private funding from the Barksdales. Then, Jim Barksdale cut back. With the funding running low, Sullivan-González let some honors staff go- an event that he said he does not talk about often. The number of students continued to increase, but the staffing decreased. With the stock market crash of 2008, more students were looking for a private college experience within the budget of a state university.

As the number of students increases, the feeling of an intimate, private college diminishes. Sullivan-González faced this problem without hesitation: “We don’t live in the past. You’ve got to recreate the community always and constantly. I didn’t have time to regret staying small. I didn’t worry about it because it just wasn’t an option. The greater problem would have been turning down 800 kids” (Sullivan-González). Sullivan-González remarked that turning down students from the honors college would decrease Ole Miss’ population as a whole: “If you score a 32 or higher on the ACT and you did not get into the honors college, you most likely would not come to the University of Mississippi. That's what the data told us. So we would be turning down hundreds of kids who probably wouldn’t come. And then my head would have been on a silver platter at the Lyceum” (Sullivan-González). He and his staff chose to endure the growing pains rather than turn down students for the sake of staying small. With this decision comes the challenge of keeping a small-college experience within an ever-expanding group of students, a problem still faced today as Ole Miss accepts larger and larger freshmen classes.

In the summer semester of 2021, Dr. Ethel Scurlock stepped in as interim dean. After a dean search in the spring of 2022, Scurlock secured a permanent position. Her first involvement with the college came almost two decades earlier when Samonds invited her to teach an Honors 101 class. After initial hesitation, Scurlock agreed and immediately fell in love with teaching

honors, as it pushed her past her boundaries as an English professor. In the years before becoming dean, Scurlock led a faculty development program for Honors 101 and 102. The objectives of this program included making sure the classes asked the broad human questions they were designed to ask in 1996. When Scurlock took charge of this program, the books read in 101 and 102 were authored by mainly white, native-German speaking men. Scurlock strove to change this and make sure the book list reflected a diversity of gender and race. In the coming years, Scurlock wants to continue this diversity effort while also creating a more consistent curriculum for 101 and 102.

PART TWO: THE HONORS EXPERIENCE

CHAPTER FIVE: HUNGRY FOR KNOWLEDGE: HONORS EDUCATION IN AMERICA

The core purpose of American honors higher education can be difficult to pinpoint. The SMBHC's current mission statement reads: "The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College prepares citizen scholars who are fired by the life of the mind, committed to the public good, and driven to find solutions" (honors.olemiss.edu). In their chapter of *The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education: New Research Evidence*, Sullivan-González, honors professor Robert Brown, and honors professor Jonathan Winburn present their research for honors education success. The chapter states,

"Honors education is about academic accomplishment but not in an isolated, discipline-specific sense. Rather, the value added of honors hinges on something broader and perhaps less easily defined. Honors students may major in physics, engineering, or literature, but they are also immersed in an environment that forces them beyond these interests. Honors education is about challenging students to focus on personal growth both as citizens and scholars" (Brown, Winburn, and Sullivan-González 180).

During his time in the SMBHC, 2003 alumnus J.R. Rigby wrote a proposal for an upper-level honors course aiming to expand the mind through broad thinking. To begin his proposal, Rigby paraphrased a story of Socrates, which he says "fits the Honors College nicely." In the story, Socrates is approached by a young man begging the philosopher to teach him. Socrates takes the young man to a river and holds him under the water. When the young man comes out of the water, having almost drowned, Socrates says, in Rigby's own paraphrased quote, "When you are as hungry for knowledge as you were for air, then I will teach you" (Rigby). This concept of honors students having an almost desperate passion for learning is evident throughout the SMBHC's history. In a letter inviting Dr. David L. Guyton to the college's ten-year anniversary

convocation, Sullivan-González invites Guyton to put himself in the shoes of an honors student: “Wouldn’t you love to be an honors student again? Maybe a freshman or a sophomore, full of intelligence and energy in tune with your capabilities and vibrating to the promise of a world in need of them? I’m lucky; I live in that atmosphere every day, and it’s a heady place” (Sullivan González).

The first honors program in America was started by Frank Aydelotte in 1922 at Swarthmore College. Aydelotte sought to curve the “academic lockstep” that occurred after World War I. With an influx of new students, professors found that they were teaching solely to the “average” student in order to meet the needs of the whole class. The top students got lost in the sea of faces. Aydelotte’s solution to this problem was the implementation of honors “seminar” classes. These classes were defined by “a system of informal instruction by the professor to a small group of students” (Rinn 72-73). Aydelotte’s system was rooted in his belief that individualized learning was superior as “he believed that honors students were capable of taking on the responsibility necessary for individualized learning, thereby cultivating their knowledge at a much deeper level than the average student” (Rinn 72).

Today, the SMBHC follows the seminar-style course plan. In the *Report of the Honors College Curriculum Planning Committee*, the committee gives the strong recommendation that the current Honors Program “contract courses” be discontinued. The committee concluded that these contract courses were not in line with the vision they had for the educational quality of the honors college. Instead, the new honors courses would be tailored to honors students and be capped at around fifteen students, never reaching past twenty-five. Despite growing from a student population of a couple of hundred to almost 1,700, most SMBHC courses meet this ceiling of fifteen students, with only chemistry classes pushing beyond this limit to allow as

many as forty-five students (Samonds). Lorenzo emphasized the restricted class size was “critical.” According to him, the ideal classroom size is twelve students. “You get past fifteen and students can hide or they get lost. It becomes difficult to gauge every student” (Lorenzo). Private colleges often have a higher faculty-to-student ratio than that of public universities. The classes capped at fifteen in the SMBHC allow students to receive a private college experience in the social and financial setting of a public university, accomplishing one of the main goals set out by Khayat and the planning committee. Lorenzo recounted an anecdote in which his colleague’s daughter transferred from Ole Miss to the University of Chicago. After transferring, the former SMBHC student told her father that the freshman honors seminar was the “only thing that prepared her for what she had to deal with at the University of Chicago because it was the same style of education” (Lorenzo).

Honors professor of political science since 2004, Robert Brown said the root of honors education is to get the students to think about what they believe and why they believe it. Brown believes the first part of this goal is easy and the second is harder. The smaller class size makes it easier for a student to “explore new ideas as opposed to always being worried, ‘If I say something, I’m going to sound dumb’” (Brown). Before our interview, Brown had just come from teaching an Intro to American Politics class of approximately 170 students. He said the kind of conversation in which students feel safe to say what’s on their mind would have been significantly harder in that class than in the seminar-style honors classes in which “you can go off and explore what someone says and see what comes of it” (Brown). The advice Brown repeatedly gives to new Honors 101 and 102 teachers is to prepare to throw the lesson plan out “because you’ll find a way back to the plan and sometimes it’s the getting back that offers really neat things” (Brown).

Young noticed in her time with the SMBHC that many students come in wondering if they are as good as they have been told their whole lives. Now that they are out of high school, they have to figure it out for themselves outside of the validation of grades and standardized tests. The honors courses allow them to do that. In her transition from English professor to associate dean of the honors college, Young brought with her the lessons she had learned from reading Shakespear's *King Lear*: "I never read anything that more forcefully showed me what it means to be who you are in the world even if it hurts." She applied this lesson to her honors students, teaching them, "if you are not in your core saying 'yes' to what could hurt you, you shouldn't be in that chair" (Young). The honors experience is about pushing boundaries.

CHAPTER SIX: HONORS VERSUS STANDARD

On paper, the difference between an honors section and a standard section of the same class has one distinction: the number of students. Beyond the numbers, honors courses are meant to be more rigorous and require more critical thinking skills. The planning committee report states, “Generally, Honors courses will be distinguished from ordinary courses by: more required writing; assignments which demand more initiative and independent thought; and content which is more sophisticated” (Laurenzo 2). Brown said that this content is not meant to be harder. It’s not about “more”, it’s about “better” (Brown). Instead of students spending time thinking about the answers, honors courses are meant to make the students spend more time thinking about the questions which often don’t have easy answers.

During the spring semester of 2023, I observed an honors section and a standard section of two classes in order to compare the student experience of each: Religion 101 and Math 115.

Rel 101 is an intro course that covers the basics of a wide range of world religions. Dr. Mary Thurlkill teaches both honors and standard sections of Rel 101. At 9:00 am, February 15, I sat at the back of Bryant Hall room 209- the building’s largest lecture hall- and observed the approximately 45 students. The students were spread throughout the room, mostly sitting alone or grouped in pairs. The room was silent as Thurlkill passed out folders with names written on them so she could call on the students easily. Thurlkill taught her lesson on Buddhism through a PowerPoint projected onto three different screens in the front of the room. Throughout the lecture, Thurlkill was almost constantly moving, shifting from one side of the room to the other and talking in a raised voice so every student could hear. Toward the end of the lesson, Thurlkill grouped the students together. Each group of 2-5 students worked through a worksheet together, joining back together to discuss. This activity was the only point in which there was a continuous

discussion between Thurlkill and the students. Before the activity, when Thurlkill asked questions, there was a consistent pause before one student- usually in the front row- answered. Thurlkill would often call on students using their name plates if no one answered. Note-taking varied, with more students at the front of the room typing or writing in notebooks. At any given moment, there were 8-10 students scrolling on their phones and a handful more browsing or doing other assignments on their laptops and tablets.

After the class ended, I walked to the SMBHC to observe Thurlkill's honors section of the same course in honors college room 108. The room was significantly smaller, with approximately fifteen students sitting without conversation around one large conference table. Thurlkill sat down at the head of the table, next to one television displaying the same PowerPoint as the first class. Thurlkill passed out similar nameplates. She spent the first few minutes of class joking and talking about the students' day. She spoke in a softer voice and sat the whole class. As she worked through the same lecture, Thurlkill received almost identical responses when prompting the students. Similar to the standard section, there were a select number of students that consistently answered questions. The only significant difference was the response time. The students in the honors section responded more quickly. The honors students did not group up, instead working together as a class to complete the same worksheet handed out in the standard section. The students took notes fervently; each student- save one who laid his head down on the table for the last half of the class- had a notebook and/or laptop screen filled with detailed notes by the end of class. There were only a couple of instances of students looking at their phones.

The biggest difference between the two sections involved the examples Thurlkill gave. The lesson in both classes focused on the concept of interdependent origination, the idea that an object or person's existence is dependent on outside factors. To illustrate this concept, the class

worked together to describe the interdependent origins of a table. Students in both classes gave nearly identical answers when asked what “makes up” the table: wood, nails, a carpenter.

Thurkill built upon this example in the honors section. She asked the students to apply the same thought process to the police officer who killed Tyre Nichols. The students discussed what might have “made up” this man leading up to the incident: his upbringing, his parents, his friends, the police academy he trained in. The room's energy shifted as Thurkill and the students took on a more serious, reflective tone. This expansive example went well beyond the table example. It invited the students to think deeply about humanity. This example may not be more “sophisticated” than the table example, but it certainly fits the criteria of “assignments which demand more initiative and independent thought” (Laurenzo 2). The class ended with Thurkill remarking that she was always running out of time with this group of students.

In a class like Rel 101, students can create philosophical discussion easily. Concepts in religion are often abstract and open to interpretation, making conversations like the one in Thurkill's honors section happen naturally. However, in math and science classes, the broader questions are harder to come by. In a statistics class, like Math 115, there is less of a clear divide between an honors and a standard section.

At 9:00, February 20, I sat in the back row of Math 115, elementary statistics, in Hume Hall room 107. Dr. Xin Dang taught this honors section. There were fourteen students spread out across four rows, with only one student sitting in the front row. As Dang went through the statistics lesson over the PowerPoint, she walked back and forth across the front of the room making sure everyone could hear. When working through examples, Dang paused to let the students answer. The students- mostly the same three or four near the front- answered without hesitation. As the class went on, more and more students began taking their phones out of their

pockets. It seemed marginally different from student behavior in standard sections. Dang said the difference between the honors and standard sections in Math 115 is that honors students take Fridays to learn how to use a statistical software.

At 10:00, March 29, I sat once again in the back row of Hume Hall room 107 to observe a standard section of Math 115 taught by Professor Cody Harville. There were approximately 40 students spread out across the rows, with more sitting in the back similar to the honors section. As Harville went through examples, he had to prompt students several times to get answers. There were significantly more students on phones and doing other assignments than in the honors section. In either class, there was no significant conversation between the professors and the students.

It is difficult to say whether or not the more “sophisticated” discussion seen in the honors section of Rel 101 was due to the students themselves. In the classes I observed, the room and number of students certainly played a factor in the flow of the discussion. In a large room of forty-five spread-out students, it is significantly more difficult to create meaningful discussion. Furthermore, with a professor at the head of the table, it becomes less tempting to pull out a phone or shop online. There were hardly any instances of students looking at phones in Thurlkill’s honors section compared to Dang’s honors section. The difference between the two was the table setup. One conference table is more conducive to consistent attention over several rows of seats facing a board. In a large lecture hall full of students, it becomes easier to hide.

Thurlkill, who began teaching honors in 2003, said there were two major differences she has observed between honors students and standard section students. Honors students have an “intellectual curiosity and confidence” that she can count on. There are students in standard section classes with the same qualities, but it would be surprising to teach an honors class

without those students. Students in the honors sections of religion classes tend to have an appetite to learn things that don't necessarily fit their major. Students in standard sections are more likely to join a Rel 101 class to just fulfill a humanities requirement in order to obtain a certain degree in order to start a certain career (Thurkill).

Brown remarked on this same concept when asked about the difference between honors students and standard section students. In honors sections of political science classes, Brown finds "less variance in terms of willingness to want to do work." Because of this variance in motivation, Brown said his goal in larger classes "isn't necessarily to get them to learn everything because they're not going to." Instead, "it's important to get them to realize it's important to care." Through teaching discussion-based honors courses, Brown has found ways to infuse his honors teaching strategies into his standard courses. He now tries to facilitate back-and-forth conversations in his large classes too (Brown).

Sullivan-González said the difference between honors and standard sections is like night and day. The difference, put simply, is "students who read or don't read" (Sullivan-González). Similarly, Scurlock noted that honors students are usually more willing to do the extra work. Furthermore, honors students tend to learn for the sake of learning. Like Thurkill, Scurlock notices a "natural curiosity" in honors students that is hard to find elsewhere. In addition, she finds that honors students are willing to "converse across differences" (Scurlock).

The second, more negative, difference that Thurkill noted has to do with the mental health of honors students. Thurkill has noticed over the years that honors students tend to stress more over grades. They come from a high school career defined by scores and awards. Their success is measured by what number is stamped on their ACT or SAT. Thurkill believes this anxiety can become "crippling" (Thurkill).

Every person that I interviewed that had taught an honors section organically brought up the mental health of honors students. The pattern seems to indicate that the majority of honors students went through grade school with a reward-oriented mindset. Brown called this the “right answer” mindset (Brown). He noticed in his honors courses that students would go through a “culture shock” of sorts when he told them he didn’t care if they got the right answer.

An exclusive, seminar-style course populated by top high school graduates sets the stage for a classroom of fifteen teacher’s pets. A student entering the SMBHC has to relearn how to learn. After coming from a high school career defined by grades, the standard method for test-taking is memorizing information and relaying it back on paper during a test. This learning style does not work in an honors classroom. Honors classes are centered around asking questions, not looking for answers.

Counter to the grade-oriented mindset, the college acceptance process does not involve any type of grade or score requirements. In the past, a student typically had to have a certain score on the ACT to be accepted, with a few exceptions (Samonds). Now, the application committee reviews applications without test scores or GPA. Instead, they focus on personal statements and letters of recommendation. Occasionally, the transcripts will include accomplishments like the 30+ club, a club requiring a score of 30 or higher on the ACT, but the committee is encouraged to disregard these accomplishments while making a decision. This method allows students to enter the honors college who may be “fired by the life of the mind” but who don’t have high numbers on their resumes. According to Samonds, this past fall, the committee admitted a student and later learned while looking at admission data that he had scored an 18 on the ACT (Samonds).

In addition to student experiences, there are notable differences for professors who teach both standard and honors sections. Financially, there is no incentive for teaching honors sections unless the professor is teaching the sections on top of an already full course load. If a professor teaches honors in addition to a full course load, they receive a compensation of \$5,000 for an overload of three hours. If the three hour overload is Honors 101 or 102, the amount increases to \$6,000. If they are teaching honors within their course load, that amount of money goes to their respective departments. According to Samonds, the departments typically use the money for travel funds. The main incentive for professors is getting to teach small classes. Samonds said he often feels like a “drug dealer”: “Once I can get them, they may never want to stop” (Samonds).

CHAPTER SEVEN: THEY COULD BE ANYWHERE, BUT THEY CHOSE TO BE HERE:

RETAINING MISSISSIPPI'S BEST AND BRIGHTEST

At its source, the overarching purpose of the honors college was to persuade elite Mississippi high school students to remain in-state. There is a 1996 article titled “Ole Miss receives record \$5.4M donation” from the Clarion-Ledger. In the second paragraph of the article detailing Khayat’s announcement, staff writer Andy Kanengiser paraphrases Khayat’s address by stating, “The gift from Ole Miss alumni James L. Barksdale and his wife, Sally McDonnell Barksdale, is also designed to keep some of Mississippi’s scholars in-state, Khayat said” (Kanengiser). Similarly, an Oxford Eagle article opens with the statement, “The University of Mississippi today announced a record \$5.4 million gift to the institution to fund a unique honors college aimed at keeping the state’s brightest students in state” (Oxford Eagle). Lorenzo said he wanted to replicate a private liberal arts college experience. “There are a few publicly supported liberal arts schools, but virtually all of them are private. People think, ‘Oh, Millsaps offers a good education or a superior education, or Rhodes in Memphis, obviously superior.’” And in my judgment, what we were trying to do was offer something of similar quality here in the context of diverse public institutions” (Lorenzo).

A public relations piece written early in the college’s history titled “Support a World-class Honors College” states, “The recruiting value of the Honors College is already evident. Will Glover of Jackson, winner of this year’s prestigious Christine and Clarence Day Business Scholarship, could have attended any university in the country.” A newspaper article profiling Glover and his upcoming arrival at Ole Miss quotes him saying, “I have been an Ole Miss fan all my life, but like many seniors, I thought it might be neat to go to college out of state. The thing that changed my mind was Ole Miss’ new Honors College”. In a document detailing the history

of the McDonnell-Barksdale Honors College, the unknown author emphasizes the fact that many SMBHC students were recruited by prestigious universities, yet they chose to attend Ole Miss because of the honors college. “Students admitted to the Honors College are routinely sought by such universities. Markeeva Morgan was recruited by Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology but chose Ole Miss because of the Honors College and the special feeling of Ole Miss and Oxford.” The document goes on to state that Andy James chose Ole Miss over Duke and Margaret Shelton turned down Vanderbilt, both because of the appeal of the SMBHC. This concept was not developed over time. The proposal given to the Barksdales states,

“The Honors College is designed to attract, educate, and retain the state’s brightest students. Many of Mississippi’s most talented students leave the state after high school never to return. The Honors College’s program will offer similar academic opportunities to those of prestigious private universities that currently attract many of the state’s best students. By keeping these students in Mississippi and by providing them with the best education possible, we ensure that Mississippi can retain a talented professional workforce.”

Within the good intentions of attracting Mississippi’s best, there is still room for improvement. In every freshman class since its inception, there has been an overwhelming majority of white, female students. Ole Miss as a whole is majority white and female, but the percentages of the SMBHC still do not align with the general population of the university. Parsons, who oversees the college’s social media, struggles with creating an accurate picture of the college’s diversity. She said she wants prospective students to look at the SMBHC’s Instagram account and see people who look like themselves, but she also doesn’t want to create a false image (Parsons). Scurlock, the college’s first black dean, said she wants to create an honors

population that reflects that of Mississippi, which is made up of 41.2% minorities (U.S. Census Bureau). She said the diversity imbalance is an issue, especially when the honors college strives to be a “lab for creativity, intellectualism, and scholarship, and then there are many of our one-on-one classrooms where you sit down and there's 15 white students and a white professor” (Scurlock).

The issue is in part due to the type of students applying every year. The SMBHC has no issue recruiting students from majority-white counties like Madison, DeSoto, and Lafayette. The challenge lies in getting enough outreach to smaller or majority-minority counties. Scurlock is going to the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science in Columbus, MS this summer to hold a summer camp for African American students from all over the state (Scurlock).

CONCLUSION

When I got the email that I had been accepted into the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, it was 2018 and I was sitting in the capital building in Jackson, Mississippi in the middle of my final Youth Legislature conference. I had just presented my mock bill that proposed to ban minors from being forced into queer conversion therapy camps. It passed. Underneath my excitement that it had passed was the dim realization that we were not the real Mississippi government, and if a bill like mine were to actually go through the state senate, it would most likely fail. I knew that the people around me were some of the top high school students in the state, and the fact that most of them agreed with me gave me hope for the future. After I got the email from the SMBHC, I started asking around to see who else got in. I wasn't surprised to find dozens of other students there who had gotten the same email.

The same energy that I felt in those mock government meetings matched the energy I felt on my first day as a student in the SMBHC. On my first day in Honors 101, I sat around a conference table in the fish-bowl room with fourteen other students with the same desire to create positive change that I had.

Over the next four years, the SMBHC would change the trajectory of my life. In my honors courses, I learned to learn differently. Throughout my high school career, I measured success through grades and accolades. I had learned how to take tests to make A's, even if I didn't really retain the information. The honors college changed that. I gradually began to understand that the point of education should be to ask and debate broad questions with people who don't agree with you.

While working on this thesis, I kept a post-it note on the front of my research file folder that says, "What is the story of the SMBHC?" I still don't have a concise answer. However,

through the hours of interviews and research of primary sources, I have found that the running thread is the almost overwhelming desire to make a difference.

While the net gain of my honors experience has been positive, not all of my experiences would be well suited for a brochure for the college. In March of my freshman year, Covid-19 hit. For a large portion of my honors experience, I sat half-paying attention as I tried to have deep discussions with other students in little boxes on my laptop screen. When things started to return to in-person classes, I remembered how heavy the atmosphere could be among honors students. Every friend I have in the honors college suffers from some level of poor mental health. The college does push students to step outside boundaries, but sometimes that can also mean pushing students beyond their limits. There is a toxic spiral that I see myself and my friends enter where we slip back into our “gifted child syndrome” ways and push ourselves too hard to reach the ever-elusive “perfection.” My experiences in the honors college have really taught me that perfection does not exist, but it’s not needed in order to create a positive change.

Most of all, the honors college taught me to ask questions. Growing up in Madison, Mississippi, it was difficult to get that perspective. In my senior year of high school, my economics teacher was Ole Miss football legend Buck Randall’s grandson. Coach Randall spoke of his grandfather in a glowing context and told us how he had played a large role in Ole Miss’ history as a football player on the undefeated team of ‘62. When I got to Honors 101, I learned about the Ole Miss riots- something I only vaguely knew about before. While watching the documentary *Ghosts of Mississippi*, I discovered that Buck Randall, while he did in part break up the riots, was one of the main instigators. He was described as the person who started and ended the Ole Miss riots. Until then, I never thought to question my economics teacher’s story. Over the past four years, similar experiences have taught me to seek out questions, not answers.

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