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UM EXPERIMENTAL HONORS PROGRAM WILL CHALLENGE BRIGHT FRESHMEN

by Maribeth Dwyer
UM Information Services

MISSOULA--

With the introduction this fall of the Experimental Honors Program at the University of Montana, for the first time outstanding Montana high school graduates will not have to look outside the state for the academic challenge that an honors program provides. This is heartening news for economic as well as educational reasons.

The new program will extend to bright freshmen -- from Montana and elsewhere -- the kind of special attention received by students enrolled in the Senior Honors Thesis Program, initiated a year ago as the first phase of an honors program in the College of Arts and Sciences.

It had long been an aspiration of a group of faculty in the college to create a program that would stimulate and sustain students able to benefit from a more rigorous academic experience than is required of the average student. In 1977, with the support of R. A. Solberg, dean of the college, William Feyerharm, associate dean, organized 10 faculty members into an Honors Committee charged to work toward this goal.

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Through the University administration and the UM Foundation, the committee found the financial support that made it possible to start the Senior Honors Thesis Program in the fall of 1978. Students accepted in the program receive scholarships funded by the Anna Davis Watkins and Gordon S. Watkins Trust. Watkins scholars may apply for grants supported by the Bertha Morton Trust to pay for books, materials, and other costs of their research projects.

The first group of seniors in the program graduated in June, and the second will start senior projects this fall.

With the program for seniors successfully launched, the committee turned its attention to seeking a way to get young scholars deeply involved in the intellectual life of the University from the very outset of their college careers. The result of the committee's effort, the Experimental Honors Program, will offer superior students entering the UM as freshmen this fall special courses and activities geared to their abilities, needs and interests.

A fundamental objective of the program is to provide the advantages of a small liberal arts college in the midst of a medium-sized university -- in effect, to give the participants the best of both worlds.

From their first day on campus, these students will find themselves in a milieu of intellectual excitement. They will plunge into a program that will stretch their minds, open new vistas on life's possibilities, demand their best achievement. They will work closely with faculty advisers and have an association with the faculty that is ordinarily enjoyed only by upperclass and graduate students.

Particular emphasis will be placed upon advising during the first year of the program, according to committee spokesman Richard E. Walton.

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"Advising will always be an important part of the program," he said, "but as the program becomes established, more attention will be paid to the development of course work and to tailoring courses of study to individual needs."

He noted that the charter class will help shape the development of the program in their four years as undergraduates.

Offerings the first year include a course to introduce students to computers, taught by Roy F. Touzeau, instructor in computer science; a course in orientation to the library and research methods, given by the library staff, and special sections of some courses, such as "History of Ancient Philosophy," which are normally open only to students of at least sophomore standing.

In addition, students in the program will take part in an honors colloquium that will feature presentations by distinguished visiting lecturers, members of the UM faculty and others.

Who are the students destined for this enriching experience? Generally, they will be those who ranked scholastically in the top 10 to 15 percent of their high school graduating class. Walton said a number of students have been invited to join the program on the basis of their college-entrance test scores and other factors.

He added that students who have not been approached by the University but who think they can profit from the program can get information about applying from the Office of the Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Montana, Missoula 59812.

Although the program is starting as an experiment, there are good reasons to be optimistic about its future. Nobody denies the need for it, and a commonly encountered obstacle to many needed programs -- lack of financing -- has been overcome.

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The program is being initiated at virtually no expense to Montana taxpayers. The faculty taking part will not be paid for the many hours they spend on the program over and above their regular course load. Almost all other program costs will be borne by the Watkins and Morton trusts.

That the participating faculty are willing to work so hard without monetary compensation is a measure of their commitment to the program. All are eager to talk about their hopes for the program.

John Lawry, chairman of the philosophy department and a member of the committee, says that an honors program can take two directions. "It can help prepare students for graduate school and give them a headstart on their careers. Or it can give them a broad, general education aimed at making them better world citizens. The design of the UM program enables it to encompass both these directions."

The enthusiasm of the faculty is shared by the administration, which has supported the concept of an honors program from the first.

UM Academic Vice President Donald E. Habbe had this to say about it:

"The honors program adds yet another dimension to the strong academic tradition at the University. It gives the truly superior student an expanded access to scholarship and learning on the campus. We hope this program of the college will be so attractive and successful that it will spread throughout the institution."

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