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Dr. Na Graduates with the First Cohort

What an odyssey! From the moment you met Dr. Na, you immediately knew he was not the stiff scholarly stereotype. As you fumbled through the interview, he was not just generally interested but was bursting with excitement at the exchange, or so it appeared.

At a later time, you questioned whether that excitement was in response to your ideas or the prospect of attaining a new victim. True to his professed goal of inflaming the minds of the youth, Dr. Kang Na quickly set about buffeting your young mind against the immense seas of knowledge in Honor’s Inquiry and Honor’s Seminar.

Of course, not every moment in Dr. Na’s presence was spent in mental vexation. Dr. Na has been an extraordinary proponent of fellowship among the Honors students. Despite different ages, majors, and extracurricular activities, students were brought together periodically to rest their minds and fill their stomachs. Members were encouraged to “get behind early” in coursework and join fellow scholars in musing at the local café, Mugsie’s, or to venture to an out-of-town restaurant and indulge the taste buds on foreign food that did not always appear enticing at first glance.

According to a Korean proverb, “A great river does not refuse any small streams.” Dr. Na has welcomed each of the First Cohort to join him in the search for knowledge and fellowship while at Westminster College. When the time comes for us to return home to our personal Ithacas, we will be changed men and women, thanks in part to the wonders our captain has steered us toward.

We hope Dr. Na, while no longer the Honors Coordinator after this year, will continue to play a role in the Honors Program he helped to build.

The First Cohort Looks Back

From its inception, the Honors Program has been fraught with unexpected difficulties. In 2008, the Ad Hoc Honors Program Committee implemented a new program designed from scratch. As to be expected with anything novel, there proved to be several unforeseen complications.

Policy, particularly the issue of previously earned college credit, was the largest stumbling block. Students in the first cohort of the program (class of 2012) remember feeling angry when learning that previously earned writing credit would not exempt them from the Honors Writing course. Students argued that college credit earned for a writing course in high school or at other institutions should satisfy the Honors Writing course requirement.

Ironically, getting honors credit for high school credit was not only difficult, but honors classes taken at Westminster were not always recorded as an honors-designated course by the Registrar’s Office. Several students were surprised when an honors course they took had not always been recorded accordingly, and they had to provide proper documentation in order to be granted credit for a class that they completed in a prior semester.

While difficulties occasionally presented themselves, students reported participation in the Honors Program as a fruitful experience. The first cohort has accomplished some amazing things collectively, from studying abroad to attaining unique internships and completing high quality research projects. Through the Honors Program, they transformed from students with potential to motivated intellectuals of academia.

Perhaps most importantly, they learned there is suffering in the quest for learning. Perhaps most importantly, they learned there is suffering in the quest for learning. Perhaps most importantly, they learned there is suffering in the quest for learning.
When some people begin a project, such a multitude of ideas swirls around in their head that they can not pick a direction. My conundrum was quite the opposite. I had no ideas. None whatsoever. With nowhere to turn, I did what every college student would do—I googled “newsletter layouts” and sought the advice of Wikipedia. While the Internet offered multiple models, I found none to my liking. Some were drab and resembled a government tax return form. Others were so colorful and crowded that they were reminiscent of a birthday clown advertisement. Swimming somewhere between Scylla and Charybdis, I decided to come up with a design all on my own.

Unbeknownst to me, Dr. Na had prepared me for such a titanic struggle. He had talked incessantly about the Greeks. Whenever a new idea was broached, he would ask us about the origin of the concept. We never knew but quickly learned the answer was almost always the Greeks. It seemed in Honors Inquiry that the Greek culture was at the heart of all ideas in Western civilization; or perhaps Dr. Na was just obsessed with the Greek culture. In either case, I at last had my answer.

The banner of this newsletter is partially derived from the name of the honors society, Omicron Kappa Sigma. The Greek letters stand for *ho kyklos sophias*, which means “the circle of wisdom.” With the publication of this newsletter, the activities of our small circle of honors students has been opened up to the view entire campus.

You will discover (on the top right of the front page) the written Greek of one of our core beliefs that has evolved to become our motto. We have not only accepted but embraced Socrates’ words, “The only thing I know is that I know nothing.” Throughout our college experience, we gain a greater appreciation of our ignorance and the mysteries yet to be unraveled.

You can further spy the seal of the Honors Program, with the Latin words *artes liberales ad veritatem*, which means “liberal arts toward truth.” We hope to apply our training in liberal arts as we communicate developments within the Honors Program. With the passing of every semester, the campus and alumni will be told what has recently transpired in the program.

**Forging New Bonds**

Some professors and students would be surprised to learn that there is indeed an Honors Program at Westminster. And no, it is not a recent development but has actually existed for years. The honor society of our Honors Program, Omicron Kappa Sigma (OKS), finds itself at the start of a great journey. For years, we regrettably have had little contact with the world outside of our small circle. Since its inception in the spring of 2006, OKS has not published any account of its activities.

The silence was not out of contempt; we did not feel ourselves a special congregation above the riffraff of the general student body. Rather, the program was a fawn fighting to stand on its own legs, struggling to make its way forward. Now that the program is about to graduate its first cohort, we extend a hand more firmly to the rest of the campus. We intend no further to go unrecognized as an organization nor to be only identified simply as that small group of students that registers for classes before everyone else. Accordingly, the purpose of this newsletter is simply communication.

Perhaps partly as a side effect of our obscurity, we have struggled to gain new prospective members. Our Greek letters do not come with easy access to certain mood-enhancing beverages, nor do we have special rituals and chants. Rather, you are thoroughly questioned in an interview and made to write an essay on literature by a philosopher long since decayed to dust. OKS is not united by blurry nights, but a crisp passion for noble, academic suffering. Perhaps underclassmen will pick up this newsletter and see that while we do not offer liquid courage, we offer a unique type of companionship that other organizations can never match.

Of course, we aim not only to recruit underclassman but also to change faculty perceptions. It has been difficult for the Honors Committee to find professors willing to teach honors classes. Perhaps Westminster professors prefer the routine of well-established courses without the hassle of honors components. We certainly hope to persuade them to step outside their comfort zone. Let it be proclaimed that we are no longer a mere fledgling group; we hunger for challenges far beyond the ordinary. We would like to thank those professors who have been both gracious and daring enough in our early years to teach an honors-designated course. It is our hope, more professors will be willing to expand their horizons and volunteer to teach an exceptional group of students.

This newsletter will reach far beyond campus boundaries. Alumni will be able to gaze proudly on the program to which they once belonged. They may reconnect with their peers in the program and with forgotten professors. It is our desire that graduates embrace their experiences in Westminster’s Honors Program and continue to fulfill their new role as alumni of OKS. We also want to communicate with all honors alumni who graduated from the previous two-year honors program. As ex-post-facto members of OKS, you provide us with the wisdom, inspiration, and practical connections that come with the extra- and post-collegiate world.

With the printing of this first issue, not only have we started a tradition, but we have forged the first few strands of an expansive web that will connect OKS with the rest of the Westminster College Community.
Where Are They Now?

A double major in business and history, Ben Nelson graduated in 2006 and set off to the Big Apple. He quickly rose to become a lead analyst for Moody’s Corporation. Moody’s is a credit rating agency that assigns financial risk ratings and provides financial research on commercial and government entities. Nelson works in Moody’s corporate finance group as a lead analyst reporting on companies in the business services, forest products, and manufacturing industries. Drawing from his Westminster liberal arts training, Nelson develops analyses, convenes committees, and endeavors to communicate his rationale to others. He also has the opportunity to interact with the management of companies, financial intermediaries (e.g., investment bankers), investors (e.g., mutual funds, hedge funds), and reporters in the financial press.

Nelson no longer lives in bustling New York City but resides in Princeton, NJ, with his college sweetheart Christie Grewe Nelson, also class of 2006, and their French bulldog Diderot. When not crunching numbers, Nelson, along with his wife, enjoys giving back to Westminster College and participating in volunteer activities on campus. Both are involved in the annual Westminster College Bond Rating Competition as well as various networking and professional development activities with Nelson’s honors thesis adviser Dr. Daniel Fischmar of the Economics and Business Department.

Nelson urges current honors students to find a thesis that not only satisfies requirements, but also is relevant enough to allow for discussion outside their Honor’s Defense. Nelson’s honors thesis dove into the history of social insurance and developed an analysis of a private social security system used in Galveston, TX. This private alternative was considered a source of inspiration for President George W. Bush’s privatization proposals that permeated the political discourse at that time. Nelson’s thesis proved a talking point with interviewers. Today, Nelson’s thesis continues to be relevant with current political candidates continuing to place the Galveston system into the forefront of the nation’s political discussions.

We wish Ben Nelson and Christie Nelson success in all their future endeavors and eagerly look forward to speaking with both of them on their next campus visit. Current OKS members can only hope for similar degrees of success.

The Philosopher’s Fancy

As with all publications, this newsletter does not exist only to deliver news about the honors program, but to receive insightful feedback as well. Thus, in every issue the op-ed section entitled “The Philosopher’s Fancy” will feature the thoughts of professors, honors alumni, and current honors students.

All are invited to impart their wisdom to the current honors students. Young in years and ever thirsting for guidance, we will be pleased to receive whatever fruits you can offer.

In perhaps a more controversial usage, this column will also feature current student grievances against the Honors Program. By making our disagreements public, we hope to gain support for our struggles as the evolving program continues to face unpredicted difficulties. However, all student grievances are expected to be well formulated and respectful. If lacking these qualities, not one single drop of ink will make its way to the page.

War Comes to Pittsburgh

After more than a year of toil, Jennifer Edder delivered her honors defense before her Honors Board and fellow students. A history major, Edder focused on the struggles of two anti-war groups in Pittsburgh during Vietnam.

Like other students, Edder gathered an enormous amount of statistics and historical analysis from books and journals, but her work also reflected deep emotional investment. She was not willing simply to cite from books, but she foraged through countless newspaper articles for the names of Vietnam vets. She was able to persuade several of them to speak with her about their traumatizing experiences abroad and frosty reception back in the United States.

The audio excerpts of her interviews reverberated around the room making it seem as if Vietnam had sprung vividly from printed pages. With every veteran Edder interviewed, she discovered again and again the veterans’ consensus opinion that “true patriotism lived not in the support of corrupt government and war, but in the compassion of peace.”

Comic Corner

A good capitalist takes advantage of the circumstances around him. Sometimes this entails taking advantage of the poor circumstances of others. Thus, in response to the Greek financial trouble, now would be the perfect time to invest in corny Greek puns. Next time you spot that cute guy or girl in your business class or you have an important job interview at a business firm, these puns can not fail to secure returns in situations where bull reigns king. Just remember: it is tax season. You can lessen your tax burden from your returns by charitably telling these jokes to others.

[The movie Acropolis Now brought down the house.]

[My Big Fat Greek Bailout left me searching my pockets.]

[Forget the Trojan horse; beware of Greeks bearing bonds.]

[I never read the financial section in the newspaper. It’s all Greek to me!]

Far from the fast-paced financial world of New York City, Ben Nelson relaxes with a coffee in New Wilmington’s laid-back coffee house Mugsie’s.
First Cohort Students and Their Honors Theses

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Schmidt’s Research on PCID2

Dr. Karen Resendes recognized Casey Schmidt’s potential in the fall of her sophomore year and soon asked Schmidt to join her lab to work on a long-term project. Schmidt accepted and has been a member of the lab ever since. The project officially became her honors work spring 2011. Schmidt researches a protein called PCID2, which has been found to be vital in mRNA export in Eukaryotic cells. Eukaryotic cells are distinct in that they house their DNA in their own separate compartment, the nucleus. The cell transcribes DNA into mRNA, which goes out to be translated into proteins. However, the mRNA must somehow get out of the nucleus in order to be translated. Schmidt believes PCID2 could help bring mRNA strands to the exit of the nucleus known as a nuclear pore. Schmidt discovered that mRNA export was completely blocked in cells in which PCID2 was previously removed. Using a technique called immunofluorescence to locate PCID2 in cells and using a variety of interaction assays, she hopes to determine what other proteins or cellular components interact with PCID2.

Schmidt has indeed seen PCID2 at the nucleus, as expected, but also found it localized at the centrosome, a structure involved in cell division. This result was unexpected, and she is looking into further studies to explain this unexpected phenomenon.

Schmidt considers herself fortunate to have been asked to work on a project by Dr. Resendes. Besides supplying her with chocolate, Dr. Resendes has accompanied Schmidt to the National Conference for Undergraduate Research in 2011.

Despite all the success so far, Schmidt admits there have been several frustrating moments. She must maintain a sterile environment for the cell line she is working with. She also must purify large amounts of protein for interaction studies. However, it comes as no surprise that Schmidt’s biggest hurdle is not having enough time to do everything that she wants to do.