



## Cover Story



# THE NEW HONORS PROGRAMS

*Low-cost, high-quality option for the academically talented*

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To the millions of young Americans who go college shopping each year, the nation's large public universities are the megamalls of higher education. They offer easy access, relatively modest prices, a something-for-almost-everyone



range of courses--but comparatively little in the way of individualized attention. Long aware that they were not adequately serving the needs of the best and the brightest of their students, an increasing number of public universities are attempting to remedy this deficiency by launching honors programs that are the equivalents of educational boutiques. The result: Public universities are attracting more and more high-achieving students like Robyn Painter.

Three years ago when Painter, who ranked in the top 3 percent of her class at McIntosh High School in Peachtree City, Ga., and had a combined score of 1480 on her Scholastic Aptitude Test, was looking for the "right" college, she was admitted to such top-ranked private universities as Georgetown in Washington, D.C., and Emory in Atlanta. But the financial aid offers from both schools did not relieve enough of the burden for Painter and her parents, a journeyman machinist and a registered nurse. So Painter turned to a low-cost alternative, the honors program at the University of Georgia. Not only did the program promise a high-quality education, but the tuition was free, thanks to the Georgia lottery. With funds provided by the lottery, in-state students who achieve a B average or higher in high school pay no tuition at any Georgia public university and also receive a \$100 book stipend each quarter.

Looking back on her college search, Painter, who is majoring in history and

Romance languages on the Athens campus, has no regrets about her decision. "I actually think I've gotten more individual attention and more access to professors here in the honors program than I would have" at either Georgetown or Emory, says the 20-year-old junior.

For students like Painter, honors programs offer smaller classes than they could otherwise hope for at a large institution. At Georgia, where less than 10 percent of each freshman class of 5,000 is admitted to the honors program, enrollment in introductory honors courses averages 20 students as compared with several hundred in regular introductory classes. "The size of a place like U. Ga. can be intimidating," says Jane Huang, a 19-year-old biochemistry major who grew up in Athens. "But the honors program combines the benefits of a large research university and a small college, so you get to see many of the same faces day after day."



Perhaps the biggest advantage that honors students at a large university reap is the chance to get to know and work with faculty members. Honors students at Georgia typically receive much more individual attention from their advisers than do other undergraduates. "I play racquetball with my adviser," says Scott Hershovitz, 20, a

political science and philosophy major from Duluth, Ga. "But my roommate, who isn't in the honors program, doesn't even know his adviser's name."

Such relationships help foster both a sense of community and a stimulating learning environment. In Prof. Ted Shifrin's honors multivariable calculus class, the atmosphere is anything but impersonal. As the half-dozen students arrive for class, they exchange pleasantries--and even some good-natured barbs--with Shifrin. A few ask questions about the previous night's homework. The interaction continues as the professor takes up his colored chalk and fills the blackboard with a rainbow of differential equations. The students participate throughout the 45-minute class, shouting out answers to the teacher's questions and interrupting with queries of their own. Most appear to genuinely enjoy the class, perhaps explaining why administrators refer to it as "math for masochists."

For Torr Mills, a 19-year-old sophomore from rural Blakely, Ga., it is this sort of classroom experience that helps him "feel at home." Mills, a mathematics major who hopes to one day teach college students himself, admits that Shifrin's calculus course has kept him up into the wee hours doing homework. Nevertheless, he is grateful to be in a class where the professor knows not just the students' names but also their hobbies and personal interests.

**Design your own.** Unfortunately, the Georgia program is not as extensive as Mills and others might wish. Honors students typically take only one of their three classes each quarter in the honors program. Still, under the direction of a faculty member, they are allowed to design their own research project--or even their own class, called a "directed study." Neeraj Chugh, a junior biology and history major from Norcross, outside Atlanta, worked in a laboratory with a cellular-biology professor last spring studying the structure of cells that eat bacteria. And when Scott Hershovitz was unable to find a class to accommodate his interest in national security policy, he decided instead to work with a political science professor to develop his own directed study project.

But the benefits of the honors experience are not confined to academic work. At the new honors college at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, the 103 freshmen all live in the same renovated building, allowing them to develop relationships outside class. The building, which also houses the offices of the honors faculty, includes a guest living quarters where visiting speakers are lodged, providing the opportunity for interaction with honors students. Georgia also has established a new honors dorm, which houses about 200 incoming honors freshmen. The university is introducing a peer-advising program as well, in which upperclassmen in the honors program will serve as mentors for freshmen, helping them acclimate to college life.



It is not just the students who are benefiting from honors programs. For the universities, the programs are providing an infusion of talent that might otherwise end up at smaller, more costly, private institutions. For example, the incoming freshman class in the honors program at the University of North Carolina--Chapel Hill averaged 1470 on their SATs and ranked in the top 1 percent of their high school class. Explains Paul Woodruff, director of one of two liberal arts honors programs at the University of Texas--Austin: "Many of our students, I'm afraid, wouldn't come here without the honors option."

Watching the growing success of honors programs like these, other large public institutions are joining the trend. Last April, Netscape President James Barksdale and his wife, Sally, donated \$5.4 million to the University of Mississippi, their alma mater, to fund a new honors college, complete with high-tech classrooms. And the University of Oklahoma has started a drive to raise money to open its own honors college.

Obviously, the boom in honors colleges presents tough new competition for more expensive private institutions. "Public universities threaten what had been a sacrosanct private differential by creating programs that mimic those at private colleges," worries David Shi, president of South Carolina's Furman University. Shi can reel off a list of advantages a student might find at a smaller private liberal arts college like Furman but acknowledges that

for many families, the decision comes down to cost. As a result of soaring private-school costs, during the past 30 years undergraduate enrollment has increased by over 260 percent at public institutions but by only 84 percent at private counterparts.



Clearly, that shift is helping to improve the caliber of students enrolling in public honors programs. Last spring, Georgia celebrated the awarding of a Rhodes Scholarship to Rob Sutherland, a senior in the honors program. The program now conducts faculty-led information sessions to encourage students to start considering applying for such awards as early as their sophomore year. Individual attention and advice like that are rare at any school. And when they are available at public school prices, it is a deal that many students are finding increasingly hard to pass up.

BY [DAVID FISCHER](#)

## KEY QUESTIONS

# Entering with honors

*In his book, Ivy League Programs at State School Prices (Prentice Hall, 1994, \$15), Robert R. Sullivan identifies key points to pursue when considering an honors program or honors college at a public university. Among the questions he recommends asking:*

### **How many honors classes will I be able to take?**

Ideally, an honors program or college should offer students the ability to take as many small classes as possible from the best faculty members at the institution. Typically, however, students enroll in only a limited number of honors classes each semester. Applicants should ask college officials how many such courses the typical honors student takes.

### **Are honors courses available to first-year students?**

At some institutions, honors programs offer a good way to escape courses given by teaching assistants as well as large introductory lecture classes, which sometimes can enroll more than 1,000 students. Students should look for programs that offer the majority of their honors classes to freshmen and sophomores. By the final two years of school, most students are taking more advanced courses within their majors and have less need for smaller honors

offerings.

**Are there special dormitories for honors students?**

Some honors programs have their own residential halls or at least their own floors in regular dorms. Not all students are interested in honors housing, but to some it can be a major consideration in choosing a school.