

**AWARD FOR ADMINISTRATIVE AND PROFESSIONAL
FOCUSED NARRATIVE**

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During most of my childhood and adolescence, my father railed against university administrators. As a professor of engineering, he had long resolved that the university is first-and-foremost about student mentorship within and outside of the classroom. In his mind, administrators could rarely improve on that mentorship experience and, in fact, were often a detriment. Today he tells his friends (with a wink) that his son has gone over to the dark side. I do not know whether I can persuade my father to think differently about the role of administrators on a college campus. Indeed, in many ways I agree with him. But I am inspired to believe that effective leadership can preserve – and occasionally even expand – the opportunities that students have for learning and growth.

Since coming to Radford University in 2004, I have assumed a variety of administrative duties in the service of our campus community. This work began with various committee memberships, a leadership position on faculty senate, and chairing the Psychology Department personnel committee. In 2011 I took on a new role as the first associate director of the Honors Academy and eventually became director in 2015. Across all of these positions I have tried to leverage my personal strength in connecting a big picture plan with the small picture details. My hope is that each of these assignments has allowed me to reinforce the foundation of any successful organization: positive interpersonal relationships with other members of our campus community.

THE BIG PICTURE: ENVISIONING A DISTINCTLY RADFORD HONORS PROGRAM

I am naturally compelled to think about things in great depth. Indeed, my children and students might argue that I think about things too much. If there is a benefit to over-thinking, it is the chance to distill complex situations down to the most crucial elements. My belief is that such distillation can allow diverse viewpoints to agree on a common direction and, in turn, allow an organization to move forward in agreement. Such cohesion around a common goal or vision is our best chance to be successful.

Over the past ten years I have thought about the Radford University Honors Academy more than any other aspect of my professional life. What is the purpose of an honors program? What are our most important values? How do we know when someone is a true “honors student”? These questions swirl in my head and wake me in the night. I spend a great deal of time trying to find the most precise language to describe the honors experience so that students, parents, faculty, and administrators all share a common vision. This goal can never be fully realized, but the vision is becoming more refined every year. As noted in the letter of support from Ms. Lisa Vassady, my belief is that intellectual curiosity and shared community are two hallmarks of the honors experience. These “big picture” characteristics have guided our decisions about changes to honors programming, the honors curriculum, and our expectations for honors students.

The 2017 honors freshman class will be the first in several years that will not receive honors scholarships. This was a surprising and abrupt change to what had become a foundational aspect of the program. Although we were disappointed with this decision, it has allowed us the opportunity to reflect on possible new directions. With this context in mind, I have spent much of my time considering the values that we are trying to find (and promote) in our honors students. Without the carrot of a scholarship, what type of student will come to honors? How can we give that student the best honors experience? In reflecting on these questions, my personal answers have focused on three values: Curiosity, authenticity, and humility. I do not know whether these virtues will ultimately represent the Honors Academy or our students, but I *do* like the idea of having a direction where we

are pointed. Once that direction has been set, I feel confident that the individual steps can get us where we want to go.

THE SMALL PICTURE: DATA-INFORMED DECISIONS

Although I think more naturally about the “big picture,” my training in social psychology has forced me to reckon with the importance details in understanding the world. For a quantitative social psychologist, it is not sufficient to have only a theory or intuition. We must also examine – in sometimes excruciating detail – the evidence for our positions. My training in statistical analysis and research design paid dividends as a researcher, but has also provided benefits in my service roles to the university. As noted most clearly in the letter of support from Steve Lerch, I am passionate about finding, analyzing, and interpreting data until we have the necessary information to make the best decision (or at least the recognition that the data are not clear). These skills have allowed me to make contributions to our understanding of retention challenges on our campus, while also being appointed to the *Research Committee* of the National Collegiate Honors Council.

This attention to the data has played a major role in my administrative service to the Honors Academy. When honors became more selective in 2013 (moving from ~225 to ~100 students-per-year) we faced the daunting task of which students to select from those who applied. In the absence of good data, we initially weighted the basic criteria (GPA, SAT/ACT, and essay score) equally. Although reasonable on its face, it was clear that several seemingly-qualified honors students would struggle academically. For the second year of admissions, I used the first year’s data to develop a statistical model that informed the admissions decisions. This new model weighted each criterion in proportion to its actual ability to predict academic success. This change contributed to our freshman-to-sophomore retention improving from 87% to 90%. Further data-driven adjustments in year three helped to move the retention to 92%. Clearly, data analysis cannot guarantee retention for every honors student, but improving retention 5% in two years was noteworthy. We have learned how to make admissions decisions that are more precise than our original intuitions.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PICTURE: PEOPLE

I am an introvert by nature, which makes the career choice of being a professor somewhat peculiar. But I have learned that – despite my need for occasional quiet time – the success of the world is built on positive interpersonal relationships. What is more, I genuinely enjoy working with the diverse array of students, faculty, and staff who can be found on a college campus. I am privileged to have a job in which I can collaborate with people who have such different talents and styles as Jason Davis (biology), Mary Hagan (honors), Ed Oakes (information technology), Moira Baker (English), Allison Pratt (admissions), Mike Dunn (new student programs), and Jennifer Whicker (library). And this is just the tip of the iceberg for an honors program, where we get to connect with almost every facet of university life *plus* have an intensive focus on our students. This focus on the honors students will always be my greatest passion, which I hope is clear from the letter of support from alumnus Zachary King.

My wife tells me that the foundations of any good relationship are communication and trust. I hope that these characteristics can be seen in the relationships that I build with students, faculty, and staff across our campus. Those relationships are the basis for the success of the honors program and, ultimately, Radford University. I am incredibly proud to make even a small contribution to that success. And I might even convince my father that university administrators can be agents for *positive* change.