



# The Honors Challenge



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Jenny Saffran, Dan Kapust

### Associate Director of Advising & Curriculum

Christine Evans

### Associate Director of Admissions & Engagement

Pete Keys

### Program Administrator

Kendra Ramthun

### Academic Advisors

Lisa Blum, Jordan Hill,  
Raquel Knops

### Student Program Assistants

Annelise Alvin, Kristen Jenkins

### 2024 SOAR Graduate Advisor

Chen-Ting Chang

### 2024 SOAR Peer Advisors

Maddy Cometa, Claire Hoppe,  
Michelle Simdon

### Washburn Observatory

1401 Observatory Drive  
Madison, WI 53706-1209  
608-262-2984

[honors@honors.ls.wisc.edu](mailto:honors@honors.ls.wisc.edu)  
[honors.ls.wisc.edu](http://honors.ls.wisc.edu)

### Newsletter Design

Jinger Schroeder  
[jingerschroeder.com](http://jingerschroeder.com)

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### Cover photo

*Students gather around Associate Director Pete Keys and canine friend, Bernie, to discuss research opportunities during the annual Fall Kickoff.*

## From the Director



As I write, I'm two weeks away from turning over the Honors Faculty Directorship to my colleague, Dr. Dan Kapust. It's been a very exciting few years to direct our program. We've graduated record numbers of Honors students, revamped our admissions processes to focus on the breadth aspects of our program, provided by far the largest numbers of Honors Only courses in the program's history, seen unprecedented numbers of students applying for our grants and awards, and inaugurated our first-ever award for an incoming Honors first-year student, the Swerdlow-Linzell Fellowship. As always, the L&S Honors students spark joy in their interactions with our wonderful staff members. I feel very fortunate to have had the chance to serve at the helm of this special program, and to have felt so supported by the rest of the College of Letters & Science (particularly Dean Wilcots).

While I will miss many aspects of this administrative role, I'm excited to return to my classroom and research full time, which also center Honors students prominently. I'll be teaching two Honors courses this year, a seminar on language learning that is part of a First-Year Interest Group (FIG) and one Honors discussion that is attached to my Child Development course in Psychology. I'll be mentoring two senior Honors thesis students and working with additional students to develop future Honors projects. I have been an active participant in the Honors program during my 27 years on the faculty and I am excited to continue this engagement.

We are thrilled to welcome Dan Kapust to his new leadership role. I've had the chance to watch him interacting with Honors students and staff and I'm really excited to see what he'll bring to the program. We are very lucky to have excellent faculty members who are willing and eager to step into leadership roles across our great university.

On Wisconsin!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jenny Saffran". The signature is fluid and cursive.

### Jenny Saffran

Faculty Director, L&S Honors Program  
Letters & Science Mary Herman  
Rubinstein Professor



*Bucky welcomes incoming Honors Faculty Director Dan Kapust, who is also the Judith Hicks Stiehm Professor of Political Theory in L&S.*

## Fall 2024 Dean's Letter



As we embark on another academic year, I look at all the work being done in the College of Letters & Science with remarkable pride. In our

College, I see research opportunities that are fueling discovery, a curriculum that challenges students to think critically and alumni working across the state and world to make a difference in their communities.

The fundamental strength of our educational experience is that it is broad

and inherently interdisciplinary. That diversity of thought, skills, backgrounds and lived experiences is what makes L&S such an extraordinary learning environment. And our unwavering commitment to the value of sifting and winnowing is what makes our education stand out. We're not just teaching students the knowledge of the world but helping them develop an understanding of how that knowledge is built. Every day we prepare our students with the tools they need to succeed and make their impact on an increasingly complex and nuanced society.

L&S remains at the heart of this vibrant university. Our faculty, students, alumni and staff continue to be recognized year after year for their

teaching, research and service. We're also strengthening our investment in the sciences and the humanities with esteemed faculty hires, new research initiatives and plans for state-of-the-art facilities on campus.

I'm proud of what we're accomplishing in the College of Letters & Science, and I hope you are, too. Thank you for your continued support of L&S.

On, Wisconsin!

**Eric M. Wilcots, Dean**

Mary C. Jacoby Professor of Astronomy  
UW–Madison College of Letters  
& Science

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## A Musical Semester In and Out of Class

By Christine Evans

“There is a big difference between watching a video of a song performed and getting to see it unfold live in front of you.” Claire Hoppe (x'27) shared this observation after seeing *The Light in the Piazza* performed by University Opera on March 17, 2024, along with Professor Margaret Butler and fellow Honors Program students. The Tony Award-winning musical, which is about a mother and daughter who travel to Italy and have life-changing experiences, brought together seasoned musical lovers as well as students who were seeing a musical performed live for the first time. Claire was one of the students who, in addition to joining the Honors Program's musical outing, was enrolled in Professor Butler's Honors Only course, Music 297: “Music, Magic, and Myth,” during the spring semester.

As part of her newly developed Honors seminar, Butler guided students through an exploration of music's role

in the creation of drama. Butler, Associate Professor of Musicology and an affiliate of the Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies Program, incorporated a wide variety of genres into her syllabus and included music from popular films like *Encanto* and from Broadway hits like *Hadestown*. In the course unit that analyzed *The Light in the Piazza*, students engaged with the musical and the romantic conception, or “myth,” of Italy. Butler even arranged for the actor who played “Clara” in the University Opera performance of *The Light in the Piazza* to perform one of Clara's songs during class. In addition to building upon student discussion of that piece, the actor talked about the show and provided insights into her portrayal of the character. This opportunity added to a rich, discussion-based course in which students thought about familiar material in new ways and could bring their personal interests to assignments.

Butler shared that she enjoyed teaching a class that laughed so much together, and she found it gratifying to see students stay after the performance of *The Light in the Piazza* to connect again with the performer they had met in class.

Prior to the Sunday matinee performance, Professor Butler, Music 297 students, and other students from the Honors Program came together for a lunchtime discussion. Over pizza, the group shared their favorite musicals, discussed creative elements that students could notice during the upcoming

(continues on page 4)



Margaret Butler

# Distinguished Honors Faculty Awards

Each year, the L&S Honors Program solicits student nominations of faculty members whom Honors students have valued as teachers of Honors courses and sections, as research mentors, or otherwise as pivotal figures in their undergraduate Honors experience. The following four faculty members were selected by the L&S Faculty Honors Committee as recipients of the 2024 Distinguished Honors Faculty Award. Below you can read some of the nominating material provided by their students. Congratulations!

## Anna Andrzejewski Art History

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*Professor Andrzejewski has directly influenced my life in so many ways. I took the honors only section of Art History 202 with Professor Andrzejewski my first semester at UW, and since then she has been my unwavering mentor. Following that semester, she introduced me to Joan B Mirviss, a UW alum who later hired me as an intern at her gallery in New York City. Last semester, I took another art history course with her on Frank Lloyd Wright. She put so much time and effort into the course, and every week we spent our weekly meetings in a different FLW house in Madison. I have never met a student who does not respect her as an individual and admire her as a professor. She is the sole reason I felt the courage to write a senior honors thesis, and with her as my advisor I feel fully supported as I navigate academic research.*

## Rahul Chatterjee Computer Science

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*Professor Chatterjee's guidance was very crucial in my contribution to major*

*projects in Computer Security and Privacy. This includes the development of systems to counter compromised web accounts in partnership with DoIT and the measurement of internet censorship that governments around the world implement as part of my Senior Honors Thesis. With these initiatives, he not only advanced my technical skills but also instilled in me self-motivation and a unique mindset of building practical and secure computer systems that solve societal problems. His commitment to fostering a supportive and enriching research environment has enabled me to excel and contribute meaningfully to the field of security and privacy.*

## Reinier Hernandez Medical Physics

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*Dr. Hernandez has been nothing short of an excellent mentor, both in research, academia, and life. His expertise in his field is second-to-none, as he is a world-leader in the emerging field of RadioTheranostics for cancer therapy. Dr. Hernandez has personally guided my development as a scientist, helping me secure over \$10,000 of my own grant funding, present my research at an*

*international conference, and collaborate with numerous faculty colleagues to develop my network and bolster my research skills. In short, Dr. Hernandez has been the single best mentor and resource I've had at UW-Madison. He has massively influenced my aspirations to pursue an MD/PhD program post-graduation, and I will be forever indebted to his openness, friendship, and empathy he has shown me since day one in the lab.*

## Yoshiko Herrera Political Science

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*Professor Herrera has been very helpful and supportive when it comes to the honors optional assignments in her class. The honors optional assignments encourage a great amount of engagement in the course that feels above and beyond the engagement required for the readings, lecture, and discussion sections. I find that the great choice offered by the selection of these honors assignments is really incredible, and that the diversity in what we are allowed to engage with allows honors students in Professor Herrera's class to really make the most of their education in the ways that they want to.*

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## A Musical Semester In and Out of Class *(continued from page 3)*

performance, and learned more about Professor Butler's research. An added bonus for attendees was the chance to chat with Kendra Ramthun, Honors Program Administrator, who saw the original production of *The Light in the Piazza* at Lincoln Center Theater in New York City and had worked with several of the cast and the creative team on other projects over her career. Students remarked that the Honors event allowed them to more fully appreciate the musical and

feel connected with more people. Sharing why she believes the Honors Program should prioritize events like this in the future, Claire Hoppe wrote, "Engaging with the arts is really important, and getting to see art happen in front of you is really a moving experience and makes understanding and talking about it more engaging and more meaningful. Just getting to go out and see a show is a great way to bond with people and spend an afternoon."

# Interdisciplinary Insights

## *An Exploration of Loneliness*

By Pete Keys

As the noon hour began on Wednesday, April 10, 2024, a host of L&S Honors and Chadbourne Residential College (CRC) students gathered in the main lounge of Chadbourne Residential Hall, grabbed slices of pizza, and joined a group of UW faculty and staff to explore academic perspectives on what the U.S. Surgeon General has deemed an “epidemic of loneliness and isolation” in the United States. This panel served as the fourth edition of the collaborative efforts of the Honors Program and CRC to provide broadly appealing and truly interdisciplinary academic programming to students.

The event was moderated by two current L&S Honors students, Ellie Thoma and Jonathan Morris, each of whom is conducting their own undergraduate research related to the topic. The moderators welcomed a host of UW’s most exceptional faculty and staff, who volunteered to serve as panelists. These experts included Kate Phelps (Gender & Women’s Studies), Christine Whelan (Consumer Science), Marcy Carlson (Sociology), Brennan Porter (University Health Services),

and Chris Cascio (Journalism).

The panelists were exceptionally engaging, each offering their own perspectives on the causes, impacts, and long-term potential solutions to the current epidemic. The research presented by the panelists ranged from multi-year studies from the Communication, Brain & Behavior Lab to a discussion around the role of varying demographic markers and lived experiences to UW resources geared toward fostering community among undergraduate students.

Sincere thanks to the Chadbourne Residential College for sponsoring the event. We also share many thanks to the planning committee members, the panelists, and the student moderators who offered their time and expertise to make this event possible. By delving into critical topics like loneliness and well-being, the L&S Honors Program hopes that these events encourage a deeper understanding of the dynamics that shape the undergraduate experience and underscore the importance of informed discussions with our incredible UW faculty and staff.



Panelists (left to right) Dr. Kate Phelps, Dr. Christine Whelan, Dr. Marcy Carlson, Brennan Porter, and Dr. Chris Cascio discuss the implications of loneliness for college students.



### **MAKE A GIFT**

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### **GENERAL FUND**

Provides direct financial support to students for projects and experiences including study abroad and conference travel, and funds Honors programmatic activities.

### **CHUCK SNOWDON DIRECTORS FUND**

In memory of Charles T. Snowdon, provides funding for the Honors Faculty Director to pursue new initiatives to benefit students.

### **PLANNED GIVING**

For information, please contact Abby Funseth at the UW Foundation (608) 405-0433 [abby.funseth@supportuw.org](mailto:abby.funseth@supportuw.org)

### **OTHER SPECIFIC IDEAS FOR SUPPORT**

Please contact Dan Kapust at [director@honors.ls.wisc.edu](mailto:director@honors.ls.wisc.edu) to share your ideas, learn more about what Honors is planning longterm, and discuss what additional possibilities are being envisioned.



# Associate Director Christine Evans Honored by the College of Letters & Science By Pete Keys



The Dean of the College of Letters & Science recognizes excellence each year with several categories of staff awards. In spring 2024, the L&S Honors Program’s Associate Director of Advising and Curriculum, Dr. Christine Evans, was selected as the recipient of an L&S Early Career Advising Excellence Award!

for undergraduates to build a portfolio of experiences to determine if graduate school is a desirable path and to become great candidates. Thanks to her efforts, this event is now offered annually and spearheaded by Evans.

When it came time to fill the Associate Director for Advising and Curriculum position, Evans was at the top of the list. She “blew [the] search and screen committee away,” according to Jenny Saffran, the Mary Herman Rubinstein Professor of Psychology and recent L&S Honors Director. “Despite being far younger than other finalists, Evans exuded maturity and insight well beyond her years.”

“She works beautifully at all levels: individually with students, collaboratively with her supervisors and peers, and creatively with me and the rest of our team,” said Saffran.

It comes as no surprise that Dr. Evans was selected. “Christine is an incredibly supportive and dedicated advisor who sincerely cares about supporting students academically, professionally, and personally,” said Kristen Jenkins, an L&S Honors student (x’25). In 2022, Evans took her big idea to educate first- and second-year students about graduate school and brought it to fruition. Nearly 100 undergraduates and 10 graduate students in High-Impact Practice programs engaged with graduate students, talking about a variety of graduate programs, how students are funded, and opportunities

for undergraduates to build a portfolio of experiences to determine if graduate school is a desirable path and to become great candidates. Thanks to her efforts, this event is now offered annually and spearheaded by Evans. When it came time to fill the Associate Director for Advising and Curriculum position, Evans was at the top of the list. She “blew [the] search and screen committee away,” according to Jenny Saffran, the Mary Herman Rubinstein Professor of Psychology and recent L&S Honors Director. “Despite being far younger than other finalists, Evans exuded maturity and insight well beyond her years.” “She works beautifully at all levels: individually with students, collaboratively with her supervisors and peers, and creatively with me and the rest of our team,” said Saffran. “Christine is a wonderful advisor in every way — she’s relentlessly creative, forward thinking, and curious about new ways that we could be improving our processes and procedures, reaching students in useful and creative ways, and helping them to make sense of their Honors education and their Wisconsin Experience.”

We congratulate Christine on this recognition of her amazing work!



*Student panelists at the Spring 2022 Demystifying Graduate School event at the Pyle Center.*



*Students engaged in discussion with new Honors Faculty Director Dan Kapust at a Wednesday @ Washburn in September 2024.*

# Honors Student Organization Revitalized After Pandemic Years

By Jordan Hill

The Honors Student Organization (HSO) has long been a feature of the L&S Honors program, led by Honors students who seek to foster connection amongst the Honors community and enhance the UW experience of their peers. Historically, this has been achieved through social events that connect students to each other, academic events that connect students with faculty members, and service events that connect students to the local community. However, pandemic-era limitations and graduating student leadership led to a downturn in HSO participation and activities. This was not the case for long, though, as a new group of students stepped up last spring to revitalize the organization.

“I joined HSO so that I could meet other Honors students,” shared academic chair Keagan Kautzer (x’27). “I wanted to get to know other people trying to get the most out of their education at UW.” Bringing students together, especially after finishing high school and beginning college with many barriers to doing so, was a common motivation amongst the new officers, and they knew it would require an intentional and collaborative effort.

Ashwini Kumble (x’26) stated that “as HSO president, my top priorities are to increase HSO visibility on campus, create meaningful events for members, and ensure that all Honors students feel represented.” Ashwini and her team worked diligently in the spring to get the word out about the return of HSO, offer some initial spring semester events, and prepare to hit the ground running in the fall.

The response they have seen is fantastic. Many Honors students, both new and returning, were indeed looking for what HSO hoped to offer, as evidenced by the growth of the organization’s following and high attendance at their first events of the semester. Wednesday @Washburn, a traditional event series in which popular Honors professors are invited for some friendly conversation/Q&A with Honors students over pizza in Washburn Observatory, got off to a particularly strong start. Academic co-chairs Keagan Kautzer and Daniel Stein (x’27) connected early on with new Honors Director Dan Kapust, who accepted their invitation to kick off the series for the 24-25 academic year. Thanks to HSO’s effective planning and

advertising, the number of students who signed up for the event quickly doubled the maximum capacity. They responded quickly, with Kapust generously offering to host a second evening the following night and the chairs working swiftly to organize the logistics. And that’s the story of how we had our first Thursday @ Washburn!

The HSO team is excited to continue the momentum and plans to offer a varied breadth of events for Honors students. A bonfire, ice skating, Lakeshore cleanup days, and more Wednesday @ Washburns are all in the works. Beyond planning events, the team hopes to contribute to a broader sense of belonging amongst Honors students and is inspired by the idea of giving back. “I’ve felt valued and supported by this community, through each and every individual interaction,” shared Vice President Nicholas Sinn (x’26), “I would love to create a place where those interactions can take place.” The Honors staff is grateful for the contributions of this team so far and look forward to continuing to support them and the future HSO boards to come.



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## Honors Experiences At Home and Abroad

Each year, the L&S Honors Program supports the experiential learning of Honors students outside the classroom. Below, two students share how those experiences impacted them.

**Bromley Conference Travel Award**  
**Brooke Kotten '24**

*243rd Meeting of the American Astronomical Society*

I commented to a friend that attending my first American Astronomical Society (AAS) felt like “being home.” AAS is \*the\* conference to attend as an astronomer — everyone is there! No matter my connection, every attendee was excited to connect and talk science. Though there were a few thousand attendees, I felt an enormous sense of community and left with a stronger will to continue to be a part of the science world. I presented a poster of my in-progress Senior Honors Thesis work. I was able to bring home a notebook full of potential explanations for the data I am

studying. After the conference, I am bringing my ideas to fill out the discussion section of my paper, hopefully inspiring a future project.

**Summer Research Apprenticeship**  
**Khadijah Dhoondia x'26**

*Kimble Lab (Dept of Human Oncology)*

I was incredibly grateful to receive funding which would allow me to delve deeper in my investigation of lactate dehydrogenase inhibitors in modulating the immune system and the response to radiation. Not only did I get a clearer picture of the direction of my project, but this summer also allowed me to recognize the soft skills and growth I was developing as an individual. By taking a step back, and asking for

assistance from more experienced lab members, I was able to refine my technique — and most importantly, realize that sometimes, it is ok to ask for help. I realized that one of the things that truly excites me about research is having the opportunity to communicate science — and most importantly, make it both accessible and understandable to others. Having identified what makes me passionate about research is incredibly thrilling, and I can't wait for future opportunities where I will be able to communicate science!

✧ *These opportunities are made possible through donations to the L&S Honors Program. Please consider making a gift:*  
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