



College of Letters & Science
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



The Honors Challenge

WINTER 2025-26



CONTENTS

[Message from the
Honors Director](#)

[Dean's Letter,
Study Abroad Stats](#)

[Student Research
Spotlight: Amanda Grant](#)

[Recognizing Senior
Honors Theses Advisors](#)

[Curriculum Spotlight:
"Things you can't say"](#)

[Alumni Spotlight:
Mel Nusbaum '65](#)

[Alumni Engagement:
Connect with Honors](#)

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Cover photo
Graduates gathered at the L&S Honors Program Commencement Celebration in May 2025.

From the Director

THIS IS THE FIRST LETTER I’ve written for The Honors Challenge as the Director of L&S Honors, and it gives me the opportunity to reflect back on the past year—my first as Director—having stepped into the role after my fantastic predecessor, Jenny Saffran! Like any



member of the UW-Madison community, I’ve learned a lot in the past year, and have benefited tremendously from being part of a community devoted to the shared task of ensuring that our Honors students have the best research, class, service, and leadership experiences possible.

We have focused much of our effort during the past year on making Washburn Observatory the center of the Honors community, including piloting several programs to do so. Some of these—for example, the new Research 101 series—have focused on undergraduate research involvement, while others—our Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 Study Days—have focused on building community and opening up Washburn to our students. Others still—like the Honors accountability groups beginning this fall—have focused on ensuring that our students have the support and community to ensure that they can succeed. All of these new programs, along with all the longstanding programs Honors

continues to provide, are due to the team efforts of the fantastic staff that I have the privilege of working with.

As the Director, working with Honors students is a joy. I have the additional joy of leading an Honors discussion section this fall in my course, “Deception and Politics.” After only a few discussions, I can’t help but be proud of how engaged, thoughtful, creative, open-minded, and civil my students are.

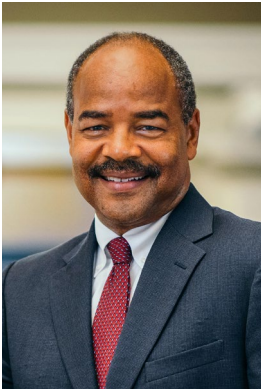
Looking out of the window of my office in the historic Washburn Observatory, I am

reminded of the fact that L&S Honors is a program and community that exists across time, and that each new cohort of Honors students joins a long tradition of excellence and rigor in research, teaching, service, and leadership. We are, as a result of this long tradition, the beneficiaries of a network of alumni who share their experiences and expertise with us. I’m particularly happy to highlight one of our alumni, Mel Nusbaum (BA Philosophy, 1965), in this newsletter. And I was also delighted by the sight of nearly 400 new Honors undergraduates filling up the bottom of Bascom Hill and wearing Badger red and keeping the storied tradition of L&S Honors alive and well!

On Wisconsin!

[Signature]

Daniel Kapust
Faculty Director, L&S Honors Program
Judith Hicks Stiehm Professor of Political Science



AS THE LEAVES change colors and students return to classes, I’m reminded of what a vibrant community this College is. Every day, I have the opportunity to see the tremendous talent of our students, faculty, alumni and staff. They challenge themselves to do their best, tackle tough questions and do work that will have an impact on this state and the world.

It was inspiring to welcome the Class of 2029 on a stunning day in early September at Memorial Union. They have a bright future ahead of them.

What makes a degree from the College of Letters & Science so special, is that we teach our students skills that will propel them in every part of their life. L&S students will enter the workforce knowing how to think critically, problem solve and communicate effectively. They learn what it takes to be in a room with people who think differently than themselves and they are equipped to lead. It is a complex world, but they’re learning to adapt, grow and embrace its challenges.

L&S is the heart of this great University. We remain committed to educational excellence and to ensuring that each student has the resources they need to thrive, even as our community continues to grow. That’s why we’re investing in top talent, state-of-the-art facilities, one-of-a-kind undergraduate research opportunities and programs dedicated to making sure everyone can

succeed. It is a privilege to watch our students pay it forward after graduation, as they go on to become world-class researchers, entrepreneurs, thought leaders and humanitarians.

While we enjoy this changing of the seasons and the burst of new energy from our newest students, I’m filled with remarkable pride for this College and the many hearts and minds that are a part of it. So, thank you for continuing to stay connected and being a part of our community.

On, Wisconsin!

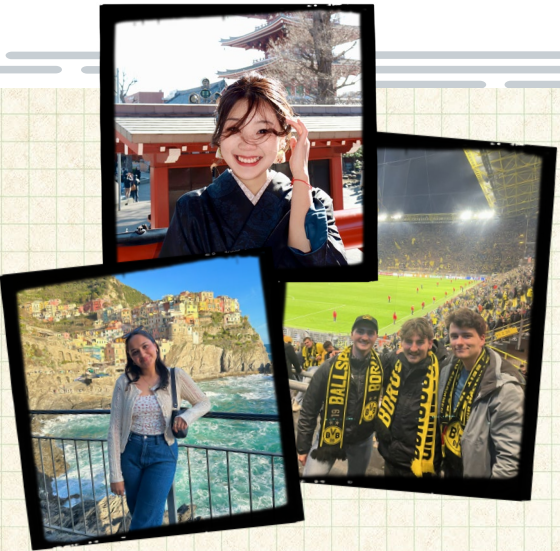
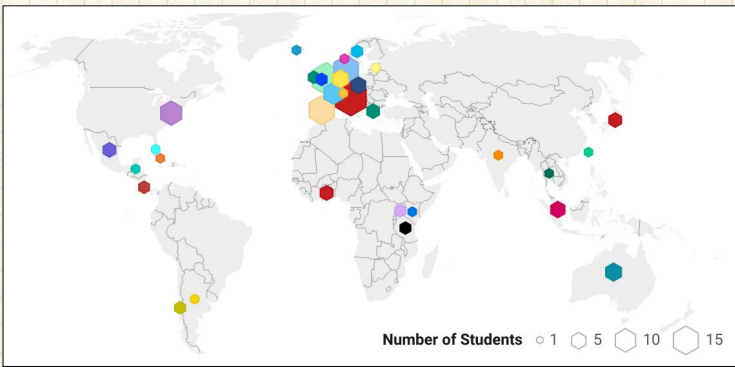
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Eric M. Wilcots, Dean
Mary C. Jacoby Professor of Astronomy
UW–Madison College of Letters & Science

Honors Students Abroad

Every year, many Honors students travel to destinations around the globe for a variety of unique study abroad experiences, including three Honors-specific programs in Ecuador, the Netherlands, and Singapore. Through a competitive application process, the L&S Honors Program provides Study Abroad Grants to help students finance their experiences. This support is made possible specifically by donations given by alumni and friends to the Honors General Fund.

WHERE HONORS STUDENTS STUDIED IN 2024-2025



“I developed a deeper sense of empathy and a stronger ability to understand diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and cultures.”

– Honors student, **Meghan McGuire x’26**, on her study abroad experience in Spain during Spring 2025



A group gathers for a picture at the opening of the Mengo Hospital in 1897.

Honors Grants: Funding Research in Uganda and England

By Amanda Grant, x'25

This summer, I went on a research trip to Kampala, Uganda and London, England supported by the Barry M. Popkin Senior Honors Thesis Research Grant from the L&S Honors Program. I visited archives to study the history of the medicalization of midwifery in colonial Uganda. My experiences provided practical skills, but more importantly, helped me begin to understand the kind of researcher I hope to become.

My thesis examines the Lady Coryndon Maternity Training School (MTS) at Mengo Hospital from 1919–1931, where British medical missionaries trained Baganda women in midwifery as part of a broader evangelizing mission that combined medical work with Christian ideals of womanhood and morality. By analyzing photos, floor plans, and architectural descriptions, I explore how the school's physical design shaped interactions between Baganda midwives, British missionaries, and surrounding communities, producing a distinct relational place for these women.

The MTS is a disciplinary space that is directly a product of British colonization in Uganda. At the same

time, the archives that I visited—the Albert Cook Medical Library Archives in Kampala and the Wellcome Collection in London—were established to collect, catalogue, and institutionalize the medical, moral, and demographic

Reading far beyond my immediate topic gave me a broader view of the period and of what Cook and his contemporaries deemed worthy of preserving.

knowledge that the colonial state and missionary organizations considered valuable. Housed in buildings that convey authority, both symbolically and in the way they operate, archives also serve as disciplinary spaces. Visiting them in the present, just as encountering the still-operating MTS, is to participate in a living artifact of colonialism.

This history appears in the inequalities of these archives. A quick Google image search illustrates the physical differences in the buildings and the ways they are publicly presented. The Wellcome Collection is located in a monumental neoclassical building, spanning multiple floors of

library space and exhibition galleries. It is on a major tourist street, open to the public, and has attractions to draw in guests, like a restaurant and a gift shop. The Albert Cook Library Archive is a small room in a medical library located in a side building of Mulago Hospital, which is associated with the Makerere University Medical School. It is a private space that requires connections and paperwork to access. These inequalities are also evident in the catalogues. The Wellcome holdings are catalogued in remarkable detail with easy access. Guests simply have to submit online what they want to view, and two days later, it appears at the archive reading room. This contrasts with the Albert Cook collection, where most things are uncatalogued, unorganized, and stored in boxes or loose on bookshelves. I spent my days with papers spread out on a table, skimming to find what is relevant for my project.

Seeing the archives in this way forced me to confront what was collected, by whom, and when. Albert Cook, the mis-

sionary doctor at Mengo Hospital and whose wife began the school I studied, is the namesake of the archive. There, the documents ranged from yellow fever research to records of garden parties and fundraisers. Reading far beyond my immediate topic gave me a broader view of the period and of what Cook and his contemporaries deemed worthy of preserving. Because I had to work through so much of the Kampala collection myself, its scale and range became visible, which offered a fuller sense of the period and of the priorities behind it. At the Wellcome, by contrast, I could see only the documents I specifically requested. The grandeur of the space conceals most of the

collection, and the legacy of colonial collecting remains quiet beneath the spectacle. Working in these places has solidified that archives are not neutral storehouses but the outcome of deliberate acts by real people.

It is rare to have access to an education that exposes me to concepts like archives as disciplinary, colonial spaces. It is rarer still to be able to undertake an international research trip like this one. This experience has shaped who I am becoming as a researcher and a historian. It has provided practical research skills and given me opportunities, like the chance to connect with students and professors at Makerere University—where as an affiliated researcher, I will present my research findings this December. Most importantly, it has deepened my understanding of the responsibilities of working on colonial histories and of being a student with access to funding such as the Barry M. Popkin grant.



The Wellcome Collection building in London where Amanda accessed archives related to her research.

Recognizing Senior Thesis Mentorship By Pete Keys

On April 11, 2025, the L&S Honors Program hosted its annual **Senior Honors Thesis Symposium** at Union South, celebrating the culmination of years of research by undergraduate Honors scholars. The event showcased student work across disciplines—from astrophysics to art history—reflecting the intellectual curiosity and rigor that define the Honors experience. This year's symposium also marked a new tradition: the inaugural *Excellence in Honors Thesis Advising Awards*, recognizing faculty whose mentorship has profoundly shaped students' academic journeys.

Among the five honorees was **Jacee Cho** from the Department of English, praised for her intuitive guidance and responsiveness. One student recalled a moment when Cho replied within 42 minutes to a complex research dilemma, not only offering a solution but also

providing resources and examples to help the student justify their approach. In the biological sciences, **David Ehrlich** of Integrative Biology was recognized for fostering a lab culture that encourages critical thinking and community. His roundtable tradition—where undergraduates present data and discuss ideas—was cited as a defining feature of his mentorship.

Physics professor **Mark Eriksson** received accolades in the physical sciences for his collaborative spirit and unwavering support. A student noted how Eriksson encouraged them to ask questions at every group meeting and helped refine graduate school applications, making the research process both rigorous and personally meaningful. **Bilge Mutlu** stood out in computer sciences for his emphasis on ethical research and student growth. His mentee highlighted how

Mutlu took time to understand their goals, connecting them with opportunities for publication and presentation that extended beyond the thesis itself.

Rounding out the honorees was former L&S Honors Program Director **Jenny Saffran** from Psychology, whose dedication to undergraduate researchers was described as both empowering and hands-on. Her students spoke of her belief in their ability to contribute meaningfully to lab work, and her consistent presence—whether editing drafts, listening to practice talks, or simply checking in—was a testament to her commitment.

Together, these five faculty members exemplify the transformative power of mentorship, reminding us that behind every great thesis is a mentor who believed, guided, and inspired.

Photo: Wellcome Collection, Wikimedia Commons; Opposite Page: Antiquary, Wikimedia Commons



MAKE A GIFT

The impact of the L&S Honors Program is greatly enhanced through contributions from alumni and friends. Please consider supporting in one of the following ways:

honors.ls.wisc.edu/make-a-gift/

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

OTHER SPECIFIC IDEAS FOR SUPPORT

Please contact Dan Kapust at 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.

New Honors Seminar Examines “Things You Can’t Say”

By Christine Evans

What do you learn in a course called “Things you Can’t Say?” According to Hannah Nygard x’27, her main takeaway was “the power that words have on us. Language is an important skill we develop, and it shapes how we experience the world. Whether or not a word is profane, it can have a profound impact on us and those around us.”

In Spring 2025, Nygard and other L&S Honors students explored issues of profanity, censorship, and language ideologies broadly in a new Honors

considered how to teach something about that word to the public. Students shared their projects creatively in a multi-day symposium. One student’s project about the word “homewrecker,” for example, involved an art installation with scenes from popular media playing simultaneously on different screens. Beyond engaging deeply with the stories of individual “bad” words, the course invited students to examine censorship throughout history and in the present. Multiple guest speakers provided outside insights and perspectives. Journalist and former professional Scrabble player Stefan Fatsis discussed the use of slurs and slang in the Scrabble community and how the rules have changed over time. Students also had the chance to speak with two giants of the lexicography world, Ben Zimmer and Jesse Scheidlower, who shed light on the history of publishing and answered questions about freedom of speech for college students.

Professor Wright hopes to regularly incorporate Honors discussion sections or seminars into her future teaching while also offering lecture versions of this in-demand course. Outside the classroom, her work provides opportunities for students interested in humanities and social science research. One Honors student is currently helping Wright create a dataset that preserves and makes accessible Black newspapers from the 1930s to 1950s, and future students will contribute to sociolinguistic interviews and experiments with Wright’s lab. In a time of increased scrutiny on language, Wright is helping students gain a richer understanding of how language works and how we move through the world as people.

One student’s project about the word “homewrecker,” for example, involved an art installation with scenes from popular media playing simultaneously on different screens.

Only seminar taught by Kelly Wright, assistant professor of language sciences. The course attracted students from a wide variety of majors and benefitted from the personal connections and “aha” moments each student contributed. For Nygard, this was “easily one of [her] favorite courses,” and the weekly opportunities to share thoughts on course material and respond to classmates were a highlight. Professor Wright echoed that the level of student engagement went above her expectations, and they all enjoyed lots of laughter together.

Throughout the semester, each student completed a lexical history project about a “bad” word and

Alumni Spotlight: Mel Nusbaum

(BA Philosophy, 1965) By Annelise Alvin x’27, Kristen Jenkins ‘25, and Dan Kapust

L&S Honors has a rich history, and the most important parts of this history are the students who have graduated from UW-Madison with Honors since the first cohort of Honors students started to take courses in the fall of 1960! We are very happy to share an excerpt from an interview with one of our many distinguished alumni, Mel Nusbaum (BA Philosophy, 1965).

Honors: What was attending college like in the 1960s? What did Honors coursework look like in the 1960s?

Mel Nusbaum: In the ‘60s, I was the lead guitarist for The Fabulous Imitations, the only racially integrated soul and blues band on campus, full of free-blowing, free-jazz, free-thinkers. I graduated in 1965, earning a BA with Honors in Philosophy at UW-Madison...Why philosophy? Good question, as originally I was headed straight toward a career in electronic engineering. But right from the start, the Honors Program opened my mind to possibilities I never dreamed of in high school. For example, freshman Honors English analyzed essays by Freud, Maslow, and others on “why do we laugh at stuff”? Fascinating. Why is something funny? And the kids in Honors were so smart, I made friends and we clicked immediately.

H: What about Honors made it so important for you?

MN: The professors in Honors were inspiring... I took to academia right away, and decided, OK, being a professor looks like a great lifestyle. I could teach a few courses, get summers off, own a house with a library, be around bright students, earn a sabbatical year in Paris if I wanted. Just like professor Julius Weinberg, [one] of my role models. So I was headed for a career in academia.

H: What has been your career trajectory, and what role did Honors play?

MN: UW-Madison awarded me a fellowship to continue my studies after graduation...but then reality sank in. Did I really want a career teaching, reading, publishing (or perishing)? Didn’t I really like playing music a whole lot more than studying the history of philosophy? And isn’t philosophy the ‘love of wisdom’, i.e. thinking for yourself, instead of rehashing the words of other people? Where do you find wisdom, anyway? In the Rathskeller? Maybe.

So, I dropped out of school and moved to New York City to be a jazz musician. Great to follow your idealistic dreams in the sixties. ‘Peace, love, and music’ was good while it lasted — until it came time to pay the rent. Then I had to find a new path.... Always good at arts and crafts, working with my hands came naturally, so I became an occupational therapist at a big hospital. That was OK for a while, but I was newly married and wanted to grow our family.

I leveraged my smarts and hospital experience, applied to the hospital administration program at Baruch College of CUNY, earned an MBA, and got right to work. I became an administrator at a NY teaching hospital, then moved up to be the program administrator of an alcoholism treatment program. After that, I won a job as financial director of a mental health center. My next job, I got to be the director of administration at a national health organization. I discovered I had talents that I never

knew. I was a good manager, I had people’s backs and earned respect by being decisive, giving fair treatment, and having a cool head.

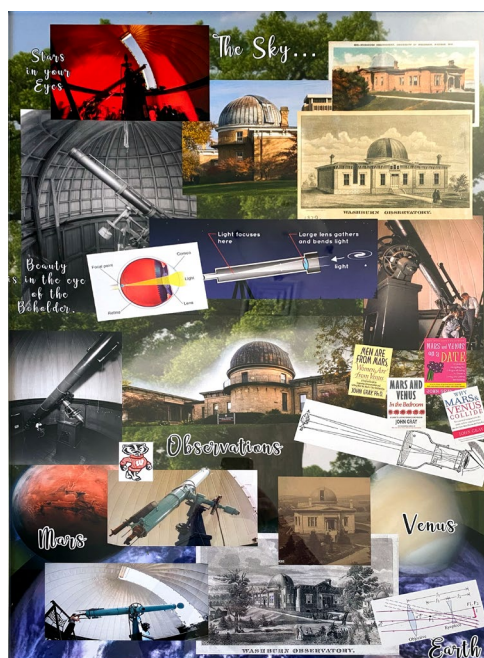
Along the way I kept up my hobbies with music and art, but also electronics. I was one of the first people in the ‘70s to own a personal computer! I [learned] more and more about computers, and finally was able to break free and start my own professional computer service. We built IT systems and kept them running, working for companies in real estate, publishing, medical office management, and especially accounting applications for nonprofit organizations all over the NYC area. Along the way, I helped a great many people, made good money, and picked up expertise in the inner workings of countless different businesses.



An article in The Daily Cardinal, circa 1963 or 1964, about the band “The Imitations”. Mel Nusbaum used the stage name “Sebastian Moon” and played guitar.



*Artwork titled "The Elements," by Mel Nusbaum,
on display in Helen C. White Hall.*



Artwork titled “Observations,” by Mel Nusbaum, on display in the Washburn Observatory Library.

What helped? My Honors courses in symbolic logic, for one. But also Honors psychology, and especially social psychology. You need to understand people to lead successful negotiations.

H: What are some recent projects you've been involved in or have worked on?

MN: Last year, I put on a gallery show of my new artwork: kinetic neon sculptures, 3-D collages, holographic vinyl wall hangings, illuminated designs, and philosophical themed posters. One poster in particular caught the eye of Emily Fletcher, the chair of the UW Philosophy Department...and it's now hanging in Helen C. White Hall. It was inspired by an Honors seminar I took in Ancient Philosophy with Professor William Hay in 1964. Being an upper-level Honors course, it only had three students!

This artwork is what I call a ‘word collage.’ At first it may look like a confusing jumble. It is based on the writings of the ancient philosophers who sought to figure out what the world was basically made out of. Starting with their list—Earth, Water, Wind, and Fire—I added a few elements that I thought were equally important, like Consciousness, and also Human Life, Culture, Sex, Time, etc. I tried to draw connections between the physical and spiritual, natural and artificial, known and unknown. I hope people are enjoying this artwork and thinking about the ideas and relationships it reveals.

Read the rest of our interview on the Honors website: honors.ls.wisc.edu/alum-nusbaum/



YOU, OUR ALUMNI, ARE AN IMPORTANT part of the Honors community. Since its beginning in 1958, the Honors Program has sought to enrich the experience of highly engaged students. To strengthen the connection between past and present students, we plan to:

FOSTER the relationship
between alumni and students
through new programming

DEMONSTRATE the
long-term value of an Honors
experience

AMPLIFY the noteworthy
accomplishments of alumni

INTERESTED? Visit us at honors.ls.wisc.edu/alumni and complete a brief form to share with us what you are up to and how you might like to get involved.

