

- Westminster Honors College Celebrates its Largest Graduating Class

**VANESSA EVELETH ('23)** – When the [Honors program](#) was introduced at Westminster by Dr. Michael Popich, landlines were still in use, laptop computers were only five years old, and Netflix wasn't even a concept. This year, the Honors College celebrates its largest graduating class since its inception in 1986. While the world may have changed since the founding—and the Honors College with it—some things have remained the same, including a commitment to nurturing a community of diverse and dedicated individuals who use what they've learned in the interdisciplinary classroom to confront the world's challenges.

The Honors College celebrates its largest class of 69 graduates at the 2021 commencement. The number of students graduating from Honors has increased drastically since its founding 35 years ago, when a class of 18 started in a new course called Honors Humanities.

Admission into the Honors College at Westminster is guided by principles of access, equity, and inclusion. Dean of the Honors College, Richard Badenhausen, notes that unlike many Honors Colleges across the country, Westminster's does not restrict access to the Honors application by identifying minimum scores on standardized tests, such as the SAT or ACT, nor does it use those scores in admission and scholarship decisions. Likewise, the program does not employ benefits typically found in other Honors Colleges, like collecting Honors students in separate residence halls or giving them priority enrollment before other students. Instead, Westminster used the application process to help students better understand the learning environment in Honors to see if the program is a good fit for them.

Honors students experience a commitment to interdisciplinarity and team-taught, discussion-based learning in seminars that often focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion led by approximately two dozen faculty drawn from all five of Westminster's schools. "We have students entering the world being able to make connections across difference," Richard says. "Collaborating in a classroom with students from many different backgrounds, identities, and experiences is going to be a super valuable skill set." Students' voices are also at the center of the Honors learning experience, a value that Richard mentions is featured across all Westminster classes.

The Honors College's success has also been recognized by outside institutions. Dr. Kris Miller, director of Honors at Utah State University, conducted the most recent external program evaluation and notes, "This outstanding curriculum, along with a strategic plan for diversity and intentional peer and faculty/staff advising, grounds the Honors College's vision of cultivating a 'community of diverse voices' at the heart of Westminster College and distinguishes this honors college as a local and national leader in honors education."

Helping students become autonomous learners and finding their authentic voice is a driving purpose of the Honors College programming. "The hope is that students leave our community after four years really having a confident sense of their own voice and feeling like they have the tools to express themselves," Richard says. The showcase of student voices culminates annually at the Honors Spring Celebration—an event that highlights achievements and allows faculty, staff, and seniors to say goodbye. The event ends with Senior Moments, a time where seniors share a meaningful moment from their time at the college. "We want to close out those students' time at Westminster featuring their voices rather than the voices of faculty, staff, or administrators," Richard explains.

While the Honors College has always been centered around interdisciplinary teaching and the cultivation of student voices, it has visibly evolved in one major way: co-curricular programming. When Richard arrived at Westminster in 2000, Honors students were not involved with running the program. Now, Honors students lead various programs—often of their own design—within the Honors College, like the popular Chai and Chat discussion series based on a Somalian tradition; the Student Honors Council; the Honors bi-annual newsletter, *Honorable Mention*; orientation; and the summer research program. Honors students also often lead on campus as ASW presidents, editors of the *Forum*, and athletic team captains while graduates continue as leaders in their new communities and within their companies after leaving the college as well, Richards says.

For the Honors Class of 2021—with 50 Honors certificates and 19 Honors degrees—Richard emphasizes their resilience. “The fact that this group continued to press ahead with research, leadership service, and supporting peers in the midst of a global pandemic for over a year, and the fact that they’ve still made it to graduation, is pretty remarkable and an achievement worth noting and celebrating,” he says. “Although it’s been a painful, challenging year, I’d like to think there’s some new skill sets and strengths that have developed as a result of those challenges and that our graduating students can draw on them going forward.”

## **FROM A FEW GRADUATES OF THE HONORS CLASS OF 2021**

### **Luke Vayo ('21)**

“I remember when I registered for classes my first year at Westminster. I was confused by the name of my Honors class, Welcome to Thinking. My naivety had me thinking I already knew all there was to know about thinking. And while I can't pin down any single moment as one where I really learned how to think, I can safely say the title of the class was not a misnomer. Because of how I think and question now, I have an entirely different perspective on my own field that gives me a more holistic view of what it's really like and has helped me find a deeper meaning as to why I want to go into medicine. In my mind, Honors promises to challenge, to humble, and to convolute what you think you know in the best ways, and that's part of what I will always remember and be grateful for.”

### **Kate Blair ('21)**

“Honors facilitated incredible opportunities for me throughout my undergraduate career, including presenting at the National Collegiate Honors Conference in Boston, serving on the Student Honors Council, and receiving an Honors Independent Summer Research Grant to explore issues in dance and language learning. Most of all, however, my experience in Honors taught me how to enter into an interdisciplinary learning community and to acknowledge the rich perspectives of my professors and classmates.”

### **Katie Valdez ('21)**

“The Honors College has been invaluable to my personal and professional growth throughout my time at Westminster. Small, close-knit, and supportive, the Honors community has been the perfect environment for me to flourish. Because of their genuine care for their students’ well-being and academic success, Honors professors have opened up numerous opportunities for me and have given me the tools to become a confident scholar. In my peers, I have found individuals just as eager to learn and grow as myself, and a community willing to help one another along on their personal and academic journeys. Though my time here has come to an end, the experiences I’ve had, the connections I’ve made, and the knowledge I’ve gained will stay with me forever, and for that I am extremely grateful.”