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Recommended Citation

Haynes, Trent, "2023-02-22 University Honors Anticipates Upcoming Changes Amidst Mid-Quarter Burnout" (2023). *The Spectator Online*. 903.
<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectator-online/903>

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The Spectator • February 22, 2023 • <https://seattlespectator.com/2023/02/22/university-honors-anticipates-upcoming-changes-amidst-mid-quarter-burnout/>

University Honors Anticipates Upcoming Changes Amidst Mid-Quarter Burnout

Trent Haynes, Volunteer Reporter

As the University Honors Program transitions into the latter half of its 63rd academic year at Seattle University, writing research papers and preparations for oral exams has students and faculty occupied. Amidst all the bustle, there are a number of upcoming changes in the program.

Racial & economic justice, sustainability & climate change and technology & its impact on society are the three directives around which the Seattle U Honors Program—previously critiqued by former students as Eurocentric—is currently directing its pedagogy. Honors Director Bullon-Fernandez highlighted the program’s alignment with Seattle U’s, “Reigniting Our Strategic Directions 2022-2027.”



Luca Del Carlo

“This year, the Honors faculty received funding from the Endowed Mission Fund to continue to deepen its work to decenter the West and teach inclusively,” Bullon-Fernandez wrote.

The university has also received a \$495,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to put toward the Race, Racialization and Resistance in the United States project. This project, through the framework of the university’s Strategic Directions, will provide resources for revising departments like University Honors. Jason Wirth, professor of philosophy and Honors associate director of the Intellectual Traditions track, explained how the entire university is engaging in a re-imagining of its curriculum.

“Honors faculty have taken some incremental but nonetheless decisive steps toward these goals, but the conversation is building momentum. It is an opportunity for a generational assessment,” Bullon-Fernandez wrote.

Such a revision extends beyond the classroom. The quarterly Honors Plenary, for example, invites students of the program to find connections between their coursework and the local arts. This quarter's plenary was hosted at Benaroya Hall and featured an interview with Isabel Wilkerson, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and author of "Caste: The Origins of our Discontents," and Krista Tippett, host of the podcast "On Being."

With the rigor of the program, however, comes the reality of burnout—a concern of students and faculty, especially in the middle of the academic year. It is not uncommon for cohorts, the student groups within each of Seattle U's three honors tracks (Intellectual Traditions, Society, Policy & Citizenship and Innovations), to lose students throughout the year.

"Although the number of students who drop out of the program is typically modest, I expect a few to do so every year," Wirth wrote to The Spectator. "Students for a variety of reasons sometimes decide that the Honors Program is not the right fit for them."

Brandon Teola, a second-year English literature major in the Intellectual Traditions track, echoes this sentiment.

"I know several honors students who have left the program early because they hoped it would align with their academic path, but it simply did not," Teola wrote to The Spectator.

While Teola expressed his own satisfaction with the program's alignment toward his studies, he admitted to a certain level of personal challenge. He noted that some of the requirements, especially with regard to reading and writing, can be challenging.

"The curriculum, along with my campus involvements, leaves me with small amounts of free time, which can sometimes be frustrating," Teola wrote.

Wirth suggested that, beyond personal workload, some stress in the program could be attributed to societal circumstances.

"The ongoing transition back to the classroom from the pandemic, coupled with [momentous] events like [Black Lives Matter] and enormous challenges like the ecological emergency and economic injustice, are genuine challenges for students and faculty alike," Wirth wrote.

The 2022-2023 academic year is the first academic season to go uninterrupted since before the outbreak of COVID-19. This has not only meant the return to in-person traditions of the program like January's Winter Social and the plenary but an increase in the student-professor engagement the program is known for as well.

"Some students are struggling with their mental well-being, but being in person makes it much easier to reach out to them directly," Bullon-Fernandez wrote. "All our classes are taught in person, and we are seeing students again coming to the Honors office. It is energizing."

According to Bullon-Fernandez, the program adapts to the student's circumstances when academic burnout is a concern.

"When faculty see that there is burnout among students in a class, they find ways to slow down or make changes to their pedagogy. If we see burnout with individual students, the Associate Directors of their track meet with them and discuss how we or Seattle U can support them," Bullon-Fernandez wrote.

Additionally, Bullon-Fernandez offers the cohort model as a resource during periods of high academic demand. Teola, reflecting on his experience before coming to Seattle U, deems another possible outcome of rigorous academic programs, competition between peers, as “a toxic learning environment.”

“I came from a very competitive high school,” Teola wrote. “People...would often ask each other about grades, would constantly compare themselves to others, and compare college decision results.”

This, however, has not been Teola’s experience in University Honors. Despite its demands, in Teola’s experience, the Honors Program has been beneficial.

“I do not feel that it is competitive at all. Rather, I think it is very encouraging and communal,” Teola wrote. “I have gained very valuable research experience, and I think I have grown a lot as a thinker and writer.”

While both students and professors voiced the benefits of the program, personal mental health remains a primary concern among any Seattle U students taking on a challenging course load. For undergraduates in the Honors Program this winter, Wirth outlined a model of a student going about their undergraduate journey in a healthy manner.

“I strongly counsel Honors students to practice self-care, to lean on the cohort for support, and to work on pacing oneself [in] a sane and sustainable manner,” Wirth wrote. “Also, to have a good sense of humor!”

As the winter quarter wraps up, Honors students, along with the rest of the Seattle U student body, face academic challenges. However, students and staff feel they have much to look forward to in the future of the program.