

ROBERT E. COOK HONORS COLLEGE

a school within a school • emphasis on critical thinking • residential retreat, a world apart, right on campus • like the rich uncle you never had • an intellectual family of peers • every possible advantage, at your fingertips

Suppose you were to take truly bright kids who grew up in modest or perhaps challenging circumstances, and ship them off to a rich uncle's mansion. Further suppose that this uncle were wealthy, wise, and caring, and took it upon himself to be sure that his young charges would learn about philosophy and history and language and art and music and culture and the ways of the world. Wouldn't that be an educator's fantasy? Wouldn't that be the best way to actualize the potential of these bright young people?

The Robert E. Cook Honors College is exactly that rich uncle, and it takes exactly such kids, bright as all heck but not necessarily worldly, and gives them every advantage that education can bestow on those thirsty for the benefit. Conveniently located in the middle of nowhere in western Pennsylvania, The Robert E. Cook Honors College is part of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) in Indiana, Pennsylvania. It is the brainchild of Robert Cook, "the rich uncle" and an alumnus of IUP, and Janet Goebel, "the governess" and IUP faculty member who is now director of the Honors College.

The thing to realize about the Cook Honors College is that it is designed, right down to the magazines on the tables and the wallpaper on the walls, to foster a life of intellectualism and culture. Many colleges have "honors classes" or an "honors program." Don't mistake an "honors program" for the Cook Honors College. First of all, this is a residential immersion program. All freshmen and most sophomores live in the dorm, which is a world apart from the rest of IUP and its remote surroundings. Paintings cover

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Just Plain Different

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every wall, well-stocked bookshelves line every common room, sculptures and antiques and tapestries are just everywhere, and most amazing of all is it's all available for you to touch, pick up, admire, inspect, or rearrange for a different silhouette. The classrooms, the dorm, the great hall, and the administrative offices are all mixed together in the same building. The college has two kitchens, and the students often make meals

You can't be anonymous here.

here family style (as well as partake of the university's dining hall across the street). There are many study salons, where students can study and gather to talk.

While I was on tour, I noted that on a single coffee table were *The Congressional Record No. 114-Part II*, *The New York Times Review of Books*, *The Economist*, *Opportunities for the Academic Year Abroad*, *The Tunnel* by William H. Gass, and *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace. At the reception desk was a three-foot tall stack of the current day's *New York Times*, one for each and every student in the college. Two students

THE REAL TRUTH ABOUT THE COOK HONORS COLLEGE

Q. What should a prospective student know about your program?

A. That this is an extremely nurturing place, where people will find out who you really are and help you to become the best person you can be. We try to spoil our students. We work at it. We demand a lot from them, but then we're going to take care of them in return. We took some students to Vienna last year, and through personal connections we were able to have some of our musicians play on one of Beethoven's pianos. Imagine that. These are the kind of life experiences that we strive to provide. This goes way beyond the curriculum or the reading list. And what we're *not* looking for are cynics or nihilists. We're looking for kids who are hungry, who will see what we're trying to offer here, and go for it. This is not a school with a parking lot full of BMWs, where the students run off to the Caribbean for spring break, and where your roommate is spending more to board her horses than your parents make. This is, however, a place where you can be a scholar in a community of scholars, where the people you go to class with are the ones you hang out with, where the professors have high expectations, where we listen to your input on how this place is run. If this sounds right to you, then we'd love to hear from you.

Q. Who would be unhappy here?

A. Someone who doesn't want to work. Someone who likes things really clean cut. Someone who brings a full set of opinions with them, but doesn't want to put them on the table. A whiner.

were in the great hall playing chess next to a Roman bust, while another walked by with a tray of cookies he'd just made in the kitchen. All three were barefoot, since this was also their dorm.

In the women's restroom I counted thirty-four different paintings, all images of women. (The men's room wasn't nearly as interesting, with some moody art shots of staircases.) There is a lightheartedness to the decor and the program, as well, which makes it seem inviting and fun and unthreatening. For example, one classroom is decorated with sixty-three paintings all related to the Arthurian legends. It's absolutely lyrical. In another classroom, a little knight in armor guards the door. One gets the impression that all this is not to be taken too seriously.

So, maybe by now you're saying to yourself, "Enough with the interior decorating, already. What's the curriculum like?"

The Cook Honors College has an innovative core curriculum. The core courses bring an integrated, cross-disciplinary approach to "Great Questions." The program is designed to hone critical thinking skills while providing a survey of the important writings in several disciplines. And, in a rather old-fashioned way, the curriculum means to impart a moral education, one of the goals of the college experience for hundreds of years before the "training school" and "smorgasbord" trends took root. (It is not at all designed to tell you your moral obligations, but is designed to get you to discover and develop your own thinking on such matters.)

The core courses are designed to create both critical thinking skills and content knowledge:

Unit A: "What do we know? What do we believe? What, therefore, should I do?"

Unit B: "What is good? What is evil? What, therefore, should I do?"

Unit C: "What is art? What, therefore, should I do?"

Unit D: "What is history? What, therefore, should I do?"

The most interesting thing the director said to me at the Robert E. Cook Honors College of IUP: "Anyone could do this. Dorms are remodeled every year at any university. Professors would be teaching classes anyway." "What about the decor?" I asked. "Surely it cost a fortune." "No way," she said. "We did all this on the cheap. All the paintings are prints, everything else is a reproduction, and the students hung the wallpaper." I guess you just have to know which reproductions to get, which professors to select, and which innovative curriculum to develop. Somehow I think there's a little more to it than just hijacking a dorm.

“The application to the university was like a page. The application to the Honors College was like a book. Totally different. You definitely couldn't just copy and paste an essay from some other application.”

—Cook Honors College student

Unit E: “Why does science matter? What, therefore, should I do?”

Unit F: “What does it mean to be human?”

Unit G: “How do we understand the sacred?”

Unit H: “Must the need for social order conflict with personal liberty?”

Unit I: “What are the obligations of the educated citizen?”

Each semester, students write a major paper that is peer-reviewed through four revisions. This fosters close interaction, critical thinking, communication skills, mastery of the English language, and cooperation rather than competition among the students. This is, without a doubt, one of the most cutting-edge curricula in North America.

One good thing about the Cook program is that it is attached to a university. You can be in the honors program and pursue any major the university offers, from business to art to anthropology. One bad thing about the Cook program is that it is attached to a university. Once you get used to being an involved and engaged student, it can be rather discouraging to sit in lecture classes where the professor is not accustomed to

C O O L B O O K S A L E R T !

From F to Phi Beta Kappa: Supercharge Your Study Skills by Lance O. Ong (Chromisphere Press)

Are good students made or born? The answer seems clear: They are made. *You can make yourself into a stellar student. The smarter you are, the greater the likelihood that you were able to coast through school without developing good study habits and without learning how to allocate your efforts strategically. Lance Ong, who literally went from F to Phi Beta Kappa as an undergraduate, has identified time-saving ways to do better in college. Even if you are a genius, you will still have to turn in work and take tests for grades. You may as well earn a high GPA for your efforts and improve your options for graduate school. This is a highly recommended book on study skills.*

The Complete Guide to Academic Stardom by James Duban (Trafford Press)

Wanna be a Truman, Fulbright, or Rhodes scholar? You have to start practically from freshman year to prepare to be competitive for these types of honors. Dr. Duban, a college professor and director of the Office for Nationally Competitive Scholarships, takes the position that any excellent student can become competitive with a little planning and preparation. Dr. Duban deconstructs good study skills to teach you how to improve your grades by working smarter, not longer and harder.

being challenged, and where the other students only want to know what's going to be on the test.

DOWNSIDE: Although the HC students are always bonded to their core class brethren, some majors dominate student schedules in the upperclass years, which draws students away from the community at the Honors College building. Also, since the dorm is a virtual mansion right in the middle of a university campus, security is tight. If residents can pick up everything in the building, so could thieves. And, once again, it is important to remember that students cannot take all their classes at the Honors College, so it is important to be sure that you like the rest of the community, including the curriculum, the professors, the students, and the infrastructure.

MORE UPSIDE: This was the most genuine, unpretentious place I visited. The students were friendly, the staff was gracious, the building was beautiful, the whole thing was like a television show from the fifties. This is not a perfect program or a perfect school, but it is certainly one that is trying to be. And that's worth a lot, all by itself.

Also, check out the essay, "The Big Meeting," on p. 175, by a Cook student.

WARNING: Over two hundred universities claim to have honors colleges or honors programs, but most of them are not like this at all. They are not residential. They do not have an innovative, coherent, sequenced curriculum. They do not have a cultural component. They may or may not have caring staff interested in you as a whole person. They may not have handpicked professors. They won't help you pick a semester

WHAT GRAD SCHOOL ADMISSIONS OFFICERS LOVE TO SEE ON YOUR APPLICATION

- Research or teaching assistant to professor (paid or unpaid)
- Departmental or subject tutor (college or high school levels)
- Writing center tutor/counselor/coach (especially if you really learned how to do it)
- A *completed* independent study class (incompleted counts less than zero)
- Residence hall advisor/peer counselor (shows maturity, plus you passed screening and training)
- Any extended research project (especially if you write a thesis or capstone paper, and doubly especially if you do a good job)

NOTE: For more on planning now to get into grad school later, read the sections on strategies to gain admission to highly competitive graduate programs in my book, *Graduate Admissions Essays: How to Write Your Way into the Graduate Program of Your Choice* (Ten Speed Press).

overseas that you can afford. So what do they have? Slightly more demanding workload and a chance to study in a class with other students more like yourself than the average. In short, they are nothing more nor less than the higher education equivalent of “tracking,” placing the smarter kids together. That’s not nothing, but it’s not like the Cook program at all.

That being said, you can visit the National Collegiate Honors Council at www.runet.edu/~nchc, and click on “Member Institutions,” to explore other options. There *are* some good programs out there, working hard to offer elite educational opportunities at bargain prices. While you’re at the NCHC Web site, check out the “Characteristics of a Fully-Developed Honors Program,” which is interesting in its banality, if nothing else. The single most important factor to look for in a program would be the residential component. Without that, you’re really just headed for another anonymous university experience.

Robert E. Cook Honors College at Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT E. COOK

founding benefactor of Cook Honors College at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP)

Q: “Bob, I’ve long been an admirer of the Cook Honors College. I am convinced there is no place like it in the United States at this time. The critical thinking pedagogy that takes place at Cook is superior to what takes place at some of the most famous programs in the nation. It harkens back to a prior age in American education when there was concern for the concepts of citizenry and education to benefit the soul. At the same time, there is a very practical outcome for the students in terms of career readiness. It is a unique institution. How did you decide on this direction for your philanthropy?”

A: "I grew up in western Pennsylvania, and I went to IUP. I had a job as a welder, and my father encouraged me to go to college. There I met Glen Olsen, a professor, who took a personal interest in me. He encouraged me to believe in myself. Working-class kids often tend to live up to other people's low expectations. He encouraged me to see my potential. That was a turning point in my life, and I'm returning the favor."

Q: "You're one of what the Wall Street Journal calls 'the new philanthropists,' not content just to give money but wanting to stay actively involved in how that money is used. How do you stay involved? How do you see your role now?"

A: "Well, I stay involved in the business side of the program. I make sure we're getting return on our expenditures. I make no comments whatsoever on the curriculum now that it's working so well. Here's what I think: No one thinks it's unusual to give a scholarship to a student who can jump higher, hit harder, and run faster. I think a student who can master Rousseau deserves a scholarship, too. It doesn't matter what he does when he graduates. If you can master Rousseau or Locke or Plato, you'll be a better businessperson, a better artist, or a better bureaucrat, for that matter. And we're investing in these kids beyond what happens within the curriculum. We're going to expand on what we're doing. We now have the Achievement Program that might fund a student for a term abroad, an unpaid internship in the summer, or travel-related expenses for their studies. We spend money on things like this, and I pay attention to all of it. We want our kids to be streetable, to be able to compete with anybody when it comes to an interview for a job or for a [graduate school] scholarship. I'm trying to get young people to think about being a star competitor for a job at twenty-six or thirty, not just that first job at twenty-two."

Q: "How's it working?"

A: "Great! Unbelievable! We sent a student to the British consulate in New York, and the first one was so good they asked for another, sight unseen. We're creating well-rounded college juniors and seniors who can compete. That's a good measure of whether you're efficacious. We just had a dean at Oxford tell us we sent him one of the best American students he'd ever had but, in fact, we didn't. We just sent him a good American student who could learn the way they teach at Oxford. So our system is working."

Cook Honors College

What do employers think of Cook graduates? This is part of a letter from an employer to Cook administrators:

“I want to compliment you all and the CHC faculty for doing an outstanding job at creating a culture that fosters motivation and critical thinking. I have truly found your students to possess both motivation and the metacognitive skills that are lacking in most college graduates. The fact that we can task undergraduate students like Tina [who succeeded on a million-dollar assignment] with serious projects is a testament to the success of the mission at CHC. What you are doing and have accomplished is unquestionably unique. You should be very proud.

“In fact, without mentioning the program, your undergraduate students have far outperformed MBA students who have worked with us in the past. Your students have now displaced that program’s students as our main source for quality interns.”