

Honors College Faculty Award Announced

M. Richard Zinman, University Distinguished Professor in James Madison College and the Department of Political Science, was selected as the 2005 recipient of the Honors College Award for Distinguished Contributions to Honors Students. Three current or former Honors College students (John Rood, David Brumbaugh and Sherman Garnett, who is currently professor and Dean of James Madison) nominated Professor Zinman for the Award.

This Award was established in cooperation with the Honors College Student Advisory Committee and the Alumni Association to recognize exceptional contributions to Honors College students through teaching, advising, or mentoring. The Award is presented once each year during the spring semester, and this is the seventh year the Award has been offered.

“We are very pleased to recognize a faculty member who has affected so many students so positively,” noted Ronald Fisher, Dean of the Honors College. The Award was presented at the University Undergraduate Scholarship Recognition Dinner in the spring of 2005. In addition to a certificate, the Award recipient receives an honorarium of \$1,000, and all the recipients of this Award are identified on a permanent display located at the Honors College in Eustace-Cole Hall.

“Professor Zinman has made contributions over a long and distinguished career, during which he has greatly affected the lives of Honors College and Madison students as well as the educational environment at Michigan State.”

Ronald Fisher
Dean of the Honors College

Richard Zinman is a University Distinguished Professor in James Madison College at Michigan State University and executive director of the LeFrak Forum/Symposium on Science, Reason, and Modern Democracy, a research center in the Department of Political Science. At James Madison, he also serves as Chair of its program in Political Theory and Constitutional Democracy. Professor Zinman specializes in political philosophy and American political thought, with special interest in the intersection of philosophy and public policy.

For some 36 years, Professor Zinman has been an acclaimed adviser, dedicated and honored teacher, and encouraging mentor to Honors College students in James Madison. A variety of students easily recall his “powerful” classes, which have introduced classical political philosophy to generations of unsuspecting—and subsequently exceedingly appreciative—students. Professor Zinman has also provided superb guidance and support to countless Honors and Madison students seeking the most appropriate graduate or law schools or competing for major national and international scholarships. In doing so he has contributed greatly to the career successes of so many MSU students. One former student summed up these contributions in noting that Dick Zinman “...helped us understand that political philosophizing does not happen in a vacuum, that it can powerfully influence public affairs—and ourselves.”



Three things attracted me to MSU:

the opportunity to participate in the founding of James Madison College, the mission of the Honors College, and the land-grant tradition."

IN THE SHADOW OF CONGRESSMAN JUSTIN MORRILL...

...teaching Honors Spartans

By Professor M. Richard Zinman

I began teaching at James Madison College in 1969. I was twenty-six years old. I had grown up in New York City and been educated at minor outposts of eastern civilization, Cornell (in central New York) and the Claremont Colleges (in southern California). Before coming to East Lansing for an interview, I had spent one day in the Midwest (in Chicago, emphatically "the Second City") and had never set foot in Michigan. My knowledge of Michigan was largely confined to an entry in Tocqueville's journal, dated 1831 and titled "A Fortnight in the Wilds." So I was a typical Woody Allen academic: a New York snob. When I accepted a job at MSU, I planned to stay for two years and then return to civilization. I am now sixty-two and beginning my thirty-eighth year as a Spartan. I have spent my entire academic life teaching undergraduates at Madison. Aside from my relationships with my closest friends and colleagues, the highlight of that life has been teaching serious students. Many of those students have been members of the Honors College. All have been a challenge. Almost all have been a delight.

Why did I come to MSU? Why did I stay? Three things attracted me to MSU: the opportunity to participate in the founding of James Madison College, the mission of the Honors College, and the land-grant tradition. At the time, I only vaguely sensed that these things were somehow related. Looking back, I see that the thread connecting them guided my teaching of honors students from the beginning. Let me try to explain.



In *Considerations on Representative Government*, published in 1860, John Stuart Mill made the following claims:

The natural tendency of representative government, as of modern civilization, is toward collective mediocrity: and this tendency is increased by all reductions and extensions of the franchise, their effect being to place the principal power in the hands of classes more and more below the highest level of instruction in the community.... It is an admitted fact that...the American democracy...is constructed on this faulty model.

While striking (and even demeaning) to us, Mill's claims were commonplace to his sophisticated readers. First, Mill could appeal to a well-established tradition stretching back to antiquity that maintained that democracy was, by nature, the rule of the ignorant and vulgar. Democracy, after all, is the rule of the majority. But (it was thought) in every society the poor are the majority. Since the poor lack the wealth and leisure needed to acquire a liberal education and since such an education is necessary in order to acquire the wisdom and cultivation needed to rule well, democracy is the rule of the unwise and uncultivated. Second, Mill could appeal to a new set of arguments according to which the problem of democracy had been exacerbated in modern

(Continued on page 22)

(Continued from page 21)

IN THE SHADOW OF CONGRESSMAN JUSTIN MORRILL...

...teaching Honors Spartans

times. In modernity, democracy and the commercial way of life go hand in hand. In our time, the tendency of democracy to homogenize society in the direction of the lowest common denominator is married to the commercialization of opinions, passions, and interests. As a result, the souls of citizens of modern democracy tend to be dominated by the desire for material comforts and their minds narrowed to a strictly utilitarian understanding of the sciences and the arts. Modern democracy tends to be even more uncultivated and more vulgar than its pre-modern predecessors.

Mill did not despair in the face of this diagnosis. Rather, he argued that the natural tendency of modern democracy—indeed, modern civilization—toward mediocrity and vulgarity could be countered by an electoral system that included proportional representation for the most highly—i.e., liberally—educated. But this proposal did not go to the root: it did not attempt to transform the nature of modern democracy by transforming the majority of its citizens.



Professor Zinman talks with JMC/HC students Ging Cee Ng and Leo Litowich

Two years later, in the midst of the Civil War, Representative Justin Morrill (Republican, Vermont) sponsored, the United States Congress passed, and President Abraham

Lincoln signed into law the first Morrill Act. This act, which became the foundation of the American system of public, state-supported, land-grant universities, could be said to have had as one of its principal aims the practical refutation of Mills's claims. Morrill's proposal was bolder than Mill's. His did attempt to go to the root.

The Morrill Act of 1862 aimed to establish in each state “at least one college where the leading object shall be, *without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanical arts...in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes on the several pursuits and professions in life” [my emphasis].*

These aims were noble but daunting. On the one hand, the “industrial classes”—that is, working men and women—were for the first time to be given access to higher education. On the other hand, those classes were to receive *both* a liberal

and a practical education.

...working men and women were, for the first time, to be given access to higher education...Hitherto, higher education had been the preserve of the leisured few...

These twin ends were unprecedented. Hitherto, higher education had been the preserve of the leisured few: the rich, even the very rich. Moreover, the core of such an education had been liberal education—an education especially in classical studies and the natural sciences, an

education that was meant to be theoretical, beautiful, and useless rather than practical, banal, and utilitarian. In other words, the Morrill Act aimed to combine things that for ages had been thought to be incompatible: aristocracy and democracy; beauty and utility.

Michigan State was founded in 1855 as “The Agricultural College of the State of Michigan.” It came under the first Morrill Act soon after its passage. As such, it has a claim to be the “pioneer land-grant College.” Cornell, my alma mater, also has such a claim. Founded in 1865, it was the first university established under the provisions of the act. Both MSU and Cornell—indeed, all the land-grant institutions—are defined, in large part, by the tensions embodied in the land-grant mission: the tensions between excellence and access, between liberal and practical education. I suspect

“All land-grant institutions are defined, in large part, by the tensions embodied in the land-grant mission: The tensions between excellence and access, between liberal and practical education.”

M. Richard Zinman

that the challenge of living with those tensions helps to explain the distinctive spirit and vitality that are hallmarks of the land-grant universities. But that challenge has also been a burden; and it is perhaps the principal source of their characteristic anxieties and frustrations.

In my experience, MSU, much more than Cornell, is the living embodiment of those tensions. MSU began as a college devoted almost exclusively to agriculture and the mechanical arts; Cornell began as a university equally devoted to the liberal and practical arts. MSU has always been wholly public; Cornell was from the first partly public and partly private. From its beginning, MSU coexisted uneasily with the older and more exclusive (“elitist”) University of Michigan; for almost a century, Cornell had no serious in-state, public-supported rival.

The Honors College was founded in 1956. If it wasn’t the first, it was one of the first such programs established in the United States. While there were many reasons for its founding, its defining charge was “to provide a distinctive

educational experience for students of high ability.”

Looked at in the light of the first Morrill Act, the founding of the HC marks an era in the history of MSU as a land-grant institution. The Morrill Act held out the promise of combining excellence and access as well as liberal and practical education. With the founding of the HC, MSU established a unit explicitly committed to the

fulfillment of that promise. Perhaps just as important, it explicitly recognized that “students of high ability” have distinctive needs and special claims on the resources of the university and the energies of its faculty. To put this another way: MSU explicitly recognized that a first-rate land-grant university must be able to attract a critical mass of first-rate students and give them the attention they need in order to flourish. And it implicitly recognized that a first-rate land-grant university must be able to transcend, resolve, mitigate, embrace, or—at the least—learn to live with the tensions between excellence and access and between liberal and practical education.

James Madison College was founded in 1967. It was one of three residential liberal arts units—along with Justin Morrill and Lyman Briggs—established by MSU in a time of booming budgets and quasi-revolutionary ferment. In my judgment, the founding of Madison marks another epoch in the history of MSU as a land-grant institution. Among other things, Madison was an attempt to combine the strengths of a small, intimate, liberal arts college with those of a vast, complex, diverse research university. Many universities had become (or were fast becoming) gigantic, bureaucratized, professionalized, impersonal, alienating, dehumanizing “multiversities.” If this was a danger for American universities in general, it was a special danger for its public, state-supported universities, which had opened their doors to tens of thousands

With the founding of the Honors College... MSU explicitly recognized that a first-rate land-grant university must be able to attract a critical mass of first-rate students and give them the attention they need in order to flourish.



(Continued on page 24)

HC

Recognizing Excellence in Teaching

(Continued from page 23)

IN THE SHADOW OF CONGRESSMAN JUSTIN MORRILL...

...teaching Honors Spartans

of students who were the first in their families to attend college. To speak plainly, the multiversity was, in part, the product of the successful democratization of American higher education—and thus, in part, the result of the attempt to live up to the goals enshrined in the Morrill Act. By establishing Madison, MSU acknowledged that the conditions for excellence in undergraduate education in general and liberal education in particular are not “luxuries” but necessities. Madison sought to establish those conditions while attempting to address the tensions built into the land-grant tradition. For example, although it had (and has) no special admission requirements, it quickly became a kind of de facto honors college. (In recent years, to take only one example, about 35% of MSU’s Phi Beta Kappa inductees have been Madison students.)

As a teacher (and adviser) of large numbers of honors students, I have lived with the tensions inherent in the intertwined missions of Michigan State, the Honors College, and James Madison. In attempting to transcend, overcome, resolve, or mitigate those tensions, I have tried to keep in mind key moments in my own education.

I began my freshman year at Cornell expecting—even longing—to be transformed by my college experience. By the end of my first year, I was both disappointed and disoriented. I was not intellectually mature enough to find my own way and none of my teachers (almost all of whom were renowned scholars) seemed even to be aware that there were lost souls like me in their classrooms. During the first semester of my sophomore year, I wandered into an introductory course in American Government (of all things) taught by Walter Berns. I immediately sensed that Professor Berns was different. I had never encountered anyone who was so thoughtful about serious matters. In particular, he was thoughtful about the question of the meaning of life. He began from and lingered over seemingly elementary

questions: Why was what we were studying important to us as human beings and citizens? He asked us to read, write, and argue about old, strange, and difficult books. He was extraordinarily demanding. He somehow brought us to the realization that the most important questions for each of us were “Who am I?” and “What is a good human being?” Above all, in a class of more than two hundred, he seemed to speak to each of us as



“Always assume there is one silent student in your class who is by far superior to you in head and in heart.”

“...I felt as if I had been released from a kind of bondage, turned around, opened up... I knew I wanted to do for undergraduates what [my professor] had done for me.”

individuals. For me (and many others), the effect was electric: I felt as if I had been released from a kind of bondage, turned around, opened up, and set on an exhilarating path of self-discovery that would require the most

rigorous self-questioning. Professor Berns' class was a hoped for but unexpected gift. And, suddenly, I knew what I wanted to do with my education and my life: I wanted to do for undergraduates what Professor Berns had done for me. I soon discovered that Professor Berns was not alone. There were other Cornell professors who were exemplary scholars and masterly teachers: men like Allan Bloom, David Brion Davis, Donald Kagan, and Walter LaFeber.

It would be many years before I was able to persuade myself that I had the ability to teach well enough to justify living the life of a teacher. As I was about to leave graduate school at Claremont for MSU, I sought out Leo Strauss, one of my mentors, for advice about teaching as a vocation. Professor Strauss was one of the most influential thinkers and teachers of the last



century. When I knew him, he was quite old and very frail. Yet he still approached every class as if his students' lives

depended upon it. Professor Strauss's advice was simple (and, I subsequently learned, the same he had given to generations of graduate students): “Always assume there is one silent student in your class who is by far superior to you in head and in heart.” He meant by that at least two things. First, “Aim high.” Second, “Do not have too high an opinion of your importance, and have the highest opinion of your responsibility.”



His advice reinforced my humility. But it also conformed to the practice of my best teachers. All of them had invited their students to attempt to discover and overcome themselves.

In my time teaching honors Spartans, I have tried to live up to the demanding goals of the first Morrill Act and the humbling examples of my best teachers. In my experience, we teachers often ask too little of our students. James Madison and the Honors College have given me the freedom to ask much of my students (and myself). When I make good use of that freedom, I find that my honors students are ready, able, and eager to the rise to the challenge. Helping set them on the path of self-discovery and self-overcoming has been the peak of my academic life. Watching many succeed has sustained my modest hope that Justin Morrill caught a bit more of the truth than did John Stuart Mill.