



1 Me standing in front of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, having completed my pilgrimage, Spring 2024

Ethan Petersen

Spring 2025

NWACC

Honors

Program

Reflection

Courses

College Chemistry I

Principles of Macroeconomics

English Composition I

English Composition II

Survey of World Literature to 1650

Survey of World Literature from 1650

History of the American People to 1877

American National Government

Introduction to International Relations

Introduction to Comparative Politics

Introduction to the United Nations

Programming Logic I

Programming Foundations I

Community, Curiosity, and Diversity

When I first started attending NWACC, I had no intention of participating in the Honors Program. Family circumstances necessitated an itinerant upbringing, never once rooting in one place for longer than a year or two. I attended my classes, gave of myself the absolute bare minimum to pass and feel it, then otherwise occupied my time with whatever hobby held my interest at the time (usually reading or video games as they were the easiest to transfer from place to place). When I arrived in Arkansas in the summer of 2023, freshly enrolled into NWACC for the coming fall, altering that pattern hadn't been a consideration. I registered for the basic requirements recommended by an advisor, and learned of the existence of Honors courses entirely incidentally when told that I had transfer credits based on my high school test scores. Armed with this information, I all-unknowingly registered for American National Government Honors with Professor Matt Evans on a whim, figuring that I liked that topic enough to engage a little more than halfheartedly—note that, at this point, I had no clue there was anything to the Honors Program beyond more involved courses. Fast forward to the near-end of the semester, step-by-step: Matt dumps a book on my desk and tells me to attend Book Club the following week; there I meet Professor Sabrina Chesne, who afterwards invites me via email to join the Honors Program; sitting at my desk at home, I ask myself, “The what?”

In the same quiet and somewhat insidious way that it compelled me to join, the Honors Program continued to foist new opportunities and considerations upon me. The following spring, I had the opportunity to take Introduction to the United Nations with Professor Matt Evans, an exploration of international institutions and relationships with a midterm at the Midwest Model United Nations conference in St. Louis and capped off with a trip to the National Model United Nations conference in New York, the latter of which was somewhat of a misnomer given attendance by students from all over the world. With those experiences behind me, I realized I wasn't done seeing what being an Honors student had to offer in the future. Last fall, I joined the audience for an excellent adaptation of *The Trojan Women* at the University of Arkansas, worked with my peers in the program to clean up J Street—an effort repeated this Spring—and attended another Model United Nations conference in Oklahoma as my midterm for Introduction to Comparative Politics. I had never been the kind of person to get involved in community events or service—but the Honors Program knew how to lower my guard and drag me into things I wouldn't have expected.



2 National Model United Nations team, Spring 2024, after a several hour conference session

Just as important as the change to my out-of-class dynamic with the world around me was the change to the way that I engaged with my coursework. Honors courses tend to be more project-based and discussion oriented, with each instructor bringing a unique style to engage students. Programming Logic I with Professor Shane May was fundamentally the same as the base class, but each project had an additional requirement of Honors students that forced them to think through the problem from a different angle and apply their learning in more expansive or unconventional ways. Principles of Macroeconomics with Professor Lindel Townsley engaged students in deeper discussions and debates on the ideas behind modern economic institutions, from rights regimes to public choice theory, connecting the basic contents of the course with high level concepts far beyond it. Survey of World Literature from 1650 with Professor Megan Looney intertwines the curriculum with community events beyond the classroom, this semester featuring the Risky Writers event from the Spring Arts and Culture Festival, wherein students and faculty submitted their unique readings from the more controversial authors of the world. History of the American People to 1877 with Professor Christopher Huggard featured a unique assigned reading exploring the role of revolutionary symbolism among enslaved peoples and abolitionists, culminating in an effort synthesizing the ideas of the book with class content and expanded research outside of it—an effort that has since changed my perspective of our revolutionary heritage and language, realization arriving in real time while giving a presentation to a full room. For each Honors course a unique twist on the curriculum, for each a different project outcome, for each an instructor pushing the student to engage with their learning in a way that was singular to them.



3 Honors Program Uno game, Fall 2024: I couldn't win, but I could end the game by forcing Brittany and Ana to discard their last cards at the same time

This confluence creates an environment that encourages creativity and cultivates curiosity, ceding control to the students and playing to their strengths and interests. The final project for English Composition II asked that we apply all that we had practiced throughout the semester in a personal piece exploring all that we see in our backyard; invoking my interest in the digital humanities, I explored the ubiquity of computation in the travails of daily life and culture, with Professor Chesne encouraging me to present my work in a non-standard form that mimicked a web article. In College Chemistry I with Professor Lois Chun, we worked in conjunction with EMPACTS on a semester long group research project of our own design concerning toxic heavy metals and paint; I was the designated historian, considering my interest in the history of premodern science, allowing me to connect my prior research on the cultural history of mercury in China with the legal history of lead in the United States. Survey of World Literature to 1650 challenged students to develop unique readings of historical works in a creative capacity, from poetic reimaginings of scenes from Virgil's *Aeneid* to *Beowulf* dialogues in playwright form; I was allowed to imagine double Aeneas residing in shining Rome and fallen Troy simultaneously, and to see the nameless dragon and unknown king as singular. Introduction to International Relations asked that we create a video presentation for our classmates from a list of subjects and

prompts; encouraging me to pursue my interest in bare life and states of exception, Professor Evans worked with me to broaden and integrate my understanding into the language of the course—the product of which has since had an irreducible effect on my perspective on the relationship between the individual and the state.

In the course of my time in the program, I have had the pleasure to meet numerous professors and peers with vastly different experiences from my own and diverse perspectives on the world. Growing up left me with pretty poor socialization, having no lasting connections due to constant movement and health issues that kept me alone for part of my formative years. Discussing marginalization and disability with the Introduction to Gender Studies students in SC 108; debating international politics with my NMUN co-delegate while waiting for a subway in Lower Manhattan to complete my pilgrimage to the Federal Reserve; lamenting the vicissitudes of the United Nations with a hilarious deli employee in Midtown; passing out from sheer exhaustion during a lecture on the Michel Foucault rabbit hole on the way back from Tahlequah, Oklahoma; laughing at the conspiracies of *Ancient Aliens* with my roommate in Denton, Texas—these experiences loom large in my memory, and I cannot honestly say I could have imagined sharing them two years ago. The daily interactions with the exemplars that person the Honors Program, and the experiences shared with them, have had a massive impact on my growth as an individual. Their ideas and convictions and stories have rubbed off on me, smoothing out my edges and making of me a more well-rounded individual with, I hope, a little more empathy and understanding than yesterday.



4 Model United Nations team photo on Time Square, Spring 2024: we had a few hours to waste before getting back to conference, so Josh shepherded us around the city despite the rain and having somehow forgotten to bring his own jacket

Lessons Learned

As mentioned, going into college, it would not be an understatement to say that I was aimless and clueless. My family has had a dearth of normal college experiences, and my only frame of reference exists on the other side of the country. My own educational experience moved from school system to school system, vacillating between brick and mortar and homeschooling, and was topped off with the life-defining event that was the COVID-19 pandemic. By the time I arrived at NWACC, I had no plans for the future and no clue what I wanted it to look like. For my high school yearbook, we were asked to hold up a placard answering where we intended to go from graduation, and I had simply written the word “downhill” in sharpie. I had anticipated stumbling through my college experience, figuring things out as I went along with a little stress and hope—admittedly, this is still more or less how it went, but the Honors Program helped provide additional help and direction.

The Honors Program has helped me to develop skills I had previously undervalued, helping me to become a more well-rounded individual capable of adapting in unfamiliar settings. Honors courses helped prepare me for greater, more challenging workloads. I tended to cruise through high school with the barest minimum of effort, but the Honors Program encouraged me to aspire to greater things. I enjoyed the content, pushing myself to take on more and do my best, and my wonderful professors helped ease me through it when I inevitably stressed myself out with worry. Honors courses helped me develop my ability to critically engage with perspectives different from my own. I’ve engaged with cultures and ideas I had never considered before, and learned to see the world from a set of eyes not my own. Honors courses helped me learn to work better with the people around me. As a co-delegate for Model United Nations conferences, as a partner in a historical research presentation, and as a single brain among many on a research paper, I have hopefully become just a little bit better at working with my peers to create many more wonderful things.



5 J Street cleanup crew, Spring 2025: it was extra windy that day, so I brought a hat; it didn't help

Perhaps more than anything, however, the Honors Program helped me become someone who could take initiative for himself. Now in my final semester, a year after joining the program, Professor Chesne took several other members and myself on a trip to Texas for the Great Plains Honors Council Conference, attended by hundreds of students from across the region bravely presenting their research—of whom I, if only somewhat less bravely, was among, presenting the slightly unripe fruits of that research project I had strung together in English Composition II the year prior. My first instinct was to avoid it, and I almost did; I almost just let the deadline pass, but forced myself to express my interest last minute, and that trip has since become a highlight of my time at NWACC. That I had become someone who would take initiative and subject himself to that was ultimately just another change the program had wrought in me. In my time at NWACC, I could not be rid of the Honors Program; it would not allow it, always pulling me back, always having something new and transformative for me.

An Anecdote

There are, honestly, too many memorable experiences to describe or name in the space of this reflection, and no way to completely summarize the way that the Honors Program has changed me as a person. I've referenced small moments throughout, just small glimpses into my past two years, but for this section I will focus on the experience that I think served as the culmination of my growth over the last two years, mentioned at the tail end of the prior section: my attendance of the Great Plains Honors Council Conference earlier this semester. For those unaware, the GPHCC is an annual conference that assembles hundreds of Honors students from across the Great Plains region and adjacent, each from all walks of life and possessed of varied interests, bringing them together to share their research on diverse subjects—from the evolution of Nintendo marketing schemes over the last century to the symbolism of the dagger John Wilkes Booth carried with him for the assassination of President Lincoln.



6 Me at the GPHCC, Spring 2025, prior to giving my presentation with barely brushed hair, having rushed there because my alarm failed

The conference opened with a hall full of rows upon rows of research posters, attendees wandering from place to place, students excited to present their labor to another. At one stop, I connected my experience in Model United Nations conferences in discussing the role of international institutions in the construction of green energy infrastructure in developing nations. At another, which I dropped by on a whim, I was taught about the scandal of the Sacred Circles exhibition at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in 1977, the background correspondences of which revealed the erasure of indigenous history among art collectors in favor of mindless aesthetic novelty. At my last stop, I discussed the evolution of the juvenile justice system state-by-state, the role of secondary institutions in detention rates, and the differences in due process between juveniles and adults—a discussion that engaged me so thoroughly that I didn't realize that, by the time it ended, myself and the other student were the only ones left in the hall, all the other posters having been taken down as students left for dinner. I left the hall to find missed texts and Chesne waiting to guide me to where everyone else was waiting, and figured then that the trip would be worthwhile.

The conference went on. A keynote speaker discussed the various opportunities available to undergraduates, only to reveal after each that they had been cut, the grants withdrawn by the new administration in the White House, a revelation that was somehow paradoxically inspiring to me. A trip to the George W. Bush Presidential Library followed the next day, where I saw the reconstructed Oval Office and the twisted remains of steel beams preserved from September 11, 2001, and discussed the work of the National Archives with staffers that now have me eagerly awaiting the availability of internships for the Barack Obama Presidential Library in Chicago. A final keynote speaker that night turned out to be a pair of local students who had formed the electronic group *darkEntity*, giving a

performance that was a joy to watch due to how much they clearly loved their work. Each of these and more besides stand out to me, but I keep going back to my time in that massive hall surrounded by students excitedly and passionately sharing their work. I'm not sure which part of it stands out to me the most. Maybe it was the diverse subject matter; maybe it was the passion by which they were relayed. Maybe it was just the fact that I found myself among them, knowing that I had my own research to share just the next day, something I wouldn't have even considered doing prior. I'm still not exactly sure when that change occurred, but I know it wouldn't have occurred at all without the support of my peers and professors in the Honors Program.

My Advice

I come from a family of perennial risk-takers: people who are willing to uproot their lives on zero notice and move on to another across the country, always seeking after that next opportunity on the wind. Whatever trait allows them to do such has clearly not passed on to me, anxious as I am about every invisible consequence, preferring instead to take the safest route available to me and avoid attention. Almost every opportunity—from that very first Book Club two years ago that led to my invitation to the Honors Program by Chesne and Matt forcing the forms for Introduction to the United Nations into my hands as I was walking out the door—was one dropped into my lap by someone else, usually by my peers and professors, usually squandered by my diffidence. If I have any advice worth taking, it would be not to be like me. Take initiative; take risks. Join the Honors Program as soon as you can. Take as many courses as you can stomach. Hoard every opportunity that reveals itself. Now is the time for it, and the Honors Program is the place for it. My only real regret is that I'm only now realizing as I'm leaving. Ultimately, though, I think the lesson will stick with me long after. Maybe.