

Honors: Worth the challenge

BY SARAH FEATHERSTONE ('13)



Being a student in the Honors College is intense. In addition to courses for their majors and minors, honors students complete a self-directed honors minor that integrates their coursework with challenging educational experiences, both on and off campus. These experiences culminate in the required Honors Capstone Project.

There's no getting around it: This is a challenging endeavor.

But honors students choose challenge and opportunity every time—and the more of them the better. They see the experiences and benefits they gain as well worth it.

“These students are voracious about learning, driven to take on new challenges and endlessly in search of fresh and original experiences beyond traditional disciplinary bounds. They're intellectual risk takers,” says Honors College Dean Bradley Newcomer. “They are active across campus in student organizations. This level of drive and determination is their lifeblood.”

Hillcrest House, located in the heart of campus, is the home of the Honors College. (Inset): Honors College Dean Bradley Newcomer.



Matthew Best, a junior honors student from Utica, New York, says he always knew he wanted to get away from his small hometown to meet new people, learn new things and speak different languages. He selected JMU because of its reputation for having one of the best undergraduate psychology departments in higher education.

“JMU, as a whole, seemed to me like a place where I could grow and do my own thing, especially in honors,” he explains.

Best added a Spanish major to complement his passion for psychology, and has capitalized on that combination to immerse himself in the research he hopes to do professionally.

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As a recipient of the Hillcrest Scholarship, Best has been able to work with the U.S. Soccer Development Academy as part of the Mindset Assessment Project to survey and assess how players' mindset and psychology affect performance. "It's the largest survey that's ever been done on player psychology, which is really exciting and humbling at the same time," he says. "If you had told me I would be able to work with the largest soccer development organization in the country ... and be in the lead of developing this survey, I probably would have laughed."

Best also serves several leadership roles as president of the JMU Spanish Club and as a teaching assistant for the Introduction to Honors seminar, a required course for all first-year honors students. Additionally, Best is a member of Sigma Delta Pi, the National Spanish Honor Society; Psi Chi, the International Honor Society of Psychology; and the Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society.

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associate dean of the Honors College

"Students come to college with original dreams and high expectations," says Phil Frana, associate dean of the Honors College. "The Honors College experience helps them pull together all the right educational components and create unique experiences to put them on a path toward those dreams."

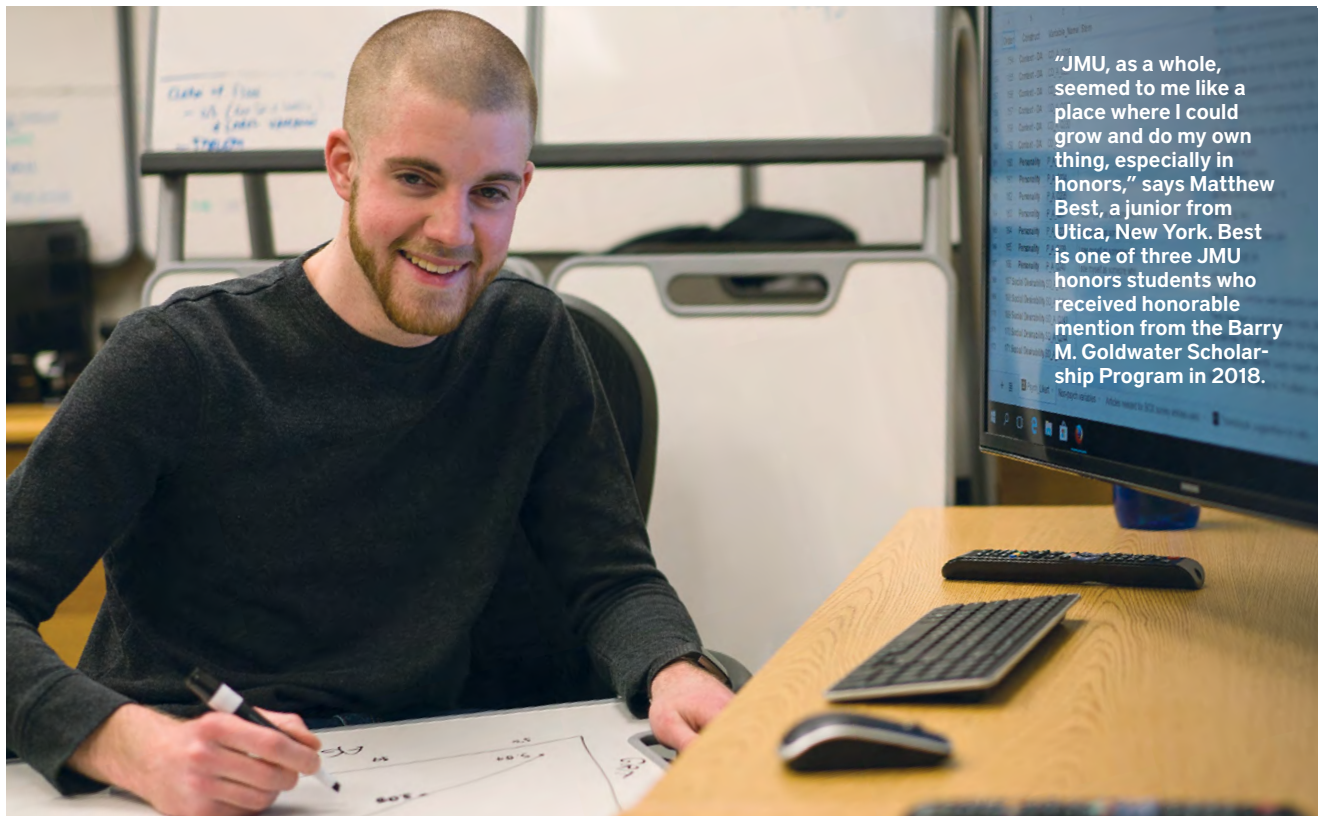
"To thrive as an honors student at JMU, you must be outwardly focused and want to embrace the world. That's not the same at honors colleges at other universities," adds Newcomer.

Like Best, senior Mary Margaret Hawkins found this focus on engaged learning to be a hallmark of her honors experience. "There's a level of expectation for students in the Honors College to be in an academically rigorous program and also be involved and engaged."

A foreign languages, literatures and cultures major, Hawkins says the opportunities she has had to be involved in the community, both locally and abroad, have made a direct impact on her immigration advocacy work.

"The [Honors] Global Studies Seminar is what started to shape my experience at JMU," Hawkins says.

In 2016, Hawkins spent her spring break completing a practicum in the Dominican



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Republic, where she taught English in a Santa Domingo school. To enable her to continue working with diverse populations, Hawkins was awarded an Honors College Hillcrest Scholarship to travel to Spain last summer. There she completed courses for her Spanish major and conducted research for her thesis comparing foreign and native language education in the U.S., Dominican Republic and Spain. While in Spain, she also completed an intensive internship teaching adult English classes and a children's program in Valencia. "Being able to have these types of experiences, they change your life," she says.

Hawkins had been planning to teach English as a second language, but in her final semester she realized that all of her course work and honors experiences had been leading her to be a different kind of change maker, one who enacts policy and informs the law. Hawkins dropped her

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JARED DIENER,
honors academic adviser


Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages certification and added a minor in Spanish-English Translation and Interpretation to refocus and chart a new path.

It might seem like a risk to switch tracks last minute, but it has paid off: Hawkins is applying to top law schools and believes

she's headed toward fulfilling her dream of working in international or immigration law.

Hawkins says her Madison Experience is reflective of the open, authentic, inclusive and holistic Honors College community. "If you're willing to push yourself academically and you're wanting to get more out of your experience at JMU, the Honors College allows you to get more of an enriching experience," she says.

"It's making these connections between what you're learning, what you believe, what your purpose is and what you want to do in the world," explains honors academic adviser Jared Diener.

"From my point of view, honors is a customized journey," Frana explains. "It's a nonstandard educational experience that helps students develop the pathway that they're going to take through their entire education and into their lives." 

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