# Beyond the Textbook

## *Honors Classes Take Subjects In Interesting Directions*

by Kirk DICKEY




*Dr. J.D. Isip*

What do Superman, the search for justice and a powerful musical score have in common?

Nope. We're not talking about a blockbuster film. We're talking about the unique opportunities Collin College Honors Institute students have this fall.

Available to any student with a 3.5 GPA, honors classes provide students with benefits including smaller class sizes, priority registration, free testing materials, exclusive honors societies and scholarships, transcript notations and articulation agreements with local universities. Honors classes run the gamut of required and elective courses, usually with an emphasis on particular topics within the subject matter.

So, one art appreciation class will explore the business side of art, while another examines the world of art through the lens of stolen treasures and the reasons for their theft. Both courses look at art appreciation overall, but a particular focus can provide students with greater insight into the subject. The same applies to art, math, history, biology or whatever they happen to be studying.

That level of focus is possible because students who take honors classes have already demonstrated a certain level of proficiency and commitment by way of their grade point average according to Dr. Adam Miller, Central Park Campus's Honors Institute director.

"I think the minimum 3.5 GPA bar gives both the class and the professor more freedom with the kinds of things that they can do," Miller said. "There is more freedom in that setting to try new things, to experiment with different learning styles. The class has already, in a sense, demonstrated that they are willing to buy into what is going to happen."

For students in Dr. Carolyn Perry's Humanities 1301 class "The City is Your Classroom: An



Experiential Approach to Honors Humanities what is going to happen is an exploration of the arts and performance through personal experience instead of classroom readings alone. Students spend about a third of their class periods attending live music, film screenings, theater performances or art exhibits.

The experiences are either free or purchased at a reduced cost, the price of which can be readily absorbed, since Dr. Perry does not assign a textbook for the class. Instead, she relies mostly on readings available for free online.

"The students attend the field trips and write essays about them," Dr. Perry said, adding that other assignments are also designed to get the students examining art and humanities closely, like a photography assignment in which the students recreate aspects of celebrated art pieces.

The Honors Institute has offered the course for several years and Dr. Perry said her students, many of whom have not taken an honors course before, appreciate the chance to experience humanities education in a different way. One student told her, "I feel as though my view of the arts world has increased by multitudes."

Dr. J.D. Isip's Writing as Super Power: Literacy, Identity Politics and DC Comic Heroes expands students' view of literature by exploring classical themes of writing through the distinctly modern form of comic books. This is the second honors English composition course that Dr. Isip, the Honors Institute director for the Spring Creek Campus, has offered. The first focused on the Marvel Comics universe.

"I'd say the Marvel class was a split between those who took the class specifically because I was using comics and those who knew nothing about comics but needed the class," Dr. Isip said. "What was surprising was having students say that they really wanted to read more comics and that they were glad that they had been exposed to a form of writing with which they were unfamiliar."

The class juxtaposes classic works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Plato and others on themes as varied as society's expectations of its citizens and their responsibility to one another with stories about Green Arrow, Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman. Far from the "funny books" of the 1950s, comic book characters



*Professor Julie Hershenberg*

deal with topics as complex as addiction, racism, personal morality and what it means to be "alien" in the modern world.

Students absorb the material and write on those themes.

"I have learned that students are more willing to write when you can spark their interest in a unique subject," he said. "This is really no different from what composition professors have always done by finding more exciting texts in newspapers, magazines and online."

Professor Julie Hershenberg's Supreme Court Cases That Shaped American Policy will likely elicit some excitement from her students as well. Students will slip on judges robes to inhabit the role of the U.S. Supreme Court justices inside the setting of Collin College's Abernathy Courtroom on its Spring Creek Campus. The idea is for the students to study landmark cases from the nation's history—Marbury v. Madison, Plessy v. Ferguson, Texas v. Johnson, Bush v. Gore and others—and deliberate those cases for themselves.

"The purpose of this honors course is to introduce students to how the court functions, the decisions that the court and justices make, and the impact of those decisions on American lives," Hershenberg said. "The interactive nature of the honors course will help build students' analytical skills, as well as assist them in gaining confidence in public speaking and debate."

Like many of the other honors classes being offered, the students are able to dig deeper into the subject because of this immersion. Honors classes available this and most semesters range from advanced math and biology to drama and psychology. Each offers its students the chance to see the subject from another perspective and "honor" it for its worth.

Visit www.collin.edu/academics/honors/ for more information about Collin College's Honors Institute. ❖

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*Photos by Nick Young, Collin College photgrapher.*