Welcome new Honors students! The Honors Program is so excited you have decided to join our learning community. Hopefully your transition to life here at Cal Poly has been a smooth one. If it hasn’t been, then don’t worry. We’ve all been there. Regardless of how the last few weeks have gone, I wanted to offer up some helpful tips that I wish I had heard (or at least listened to) during my first year on campus.
First and foremost, get to know your professors! I cannot stress this enough. Whether it’s just casually chatting before or after class, emailing them early on to introduce yourself, or my personal favorite, attending office hours, getting to know your professors will make your college career much more worthwhile. Our professors teach at Cal Poly (and in the Honors Program) because they love engaging with students. Unfortunately, it’s easy for us as students to get so wrapped up in other things that we fail to capitalize on opportunities provided by instructors. They provide office hours for a reason, so take advantage of them!

I know that since I started attending my professors’ office hours more frequently, my grades, my learning, my communication skills, and my support network have improved dramatically. My professors have alerted me to amazing opportunities, and they’ve challenged me to grow as an individual. Without them, I may have never pushed myself the same way.

Challenging yourself brings me to my next piece of advice – don’t be afraid to try something new! I highly encourage you to take a class that isn’t for your major, or join a club that isn’t related to past experiences in high school. Find something new and interesting, and go for it. University life provides daily opportunities for you to step out of your comfort zone, try new things, and meet new people. Make the most of your time here. Explore. Work to make yourself a more well-rounded individual, and maybe find a passion for something you never knew you loved.

Lastly, I encourage you to become involved as active citizens in our campus and local communities. The Honors Program provides you with amazing opportunities to get involved. If you enjoy volunteer work, sporting events, the arts, eating, or outdoor adventuring, San Luis Obispo has a lot to offer. Ask your Honors Mentor what they like to do for fun or how they stay connected with those around them. I’m sure they will have a ton of suggestions. My life at Cal Poly has been a wonderful trial and error experience. Above are some things that have worked for me. I wish you the best of luck on your path. Be brave and adventurous in finding out what works for you!
Erin Morrato, a Colorado native and 3rd-year Honors student, chose Cal Poly to take advantage of the amazing education offered. Along the way, she’s found so much more. Aside from being an architecture major and working toward a minor in architectural engineering, Morrato is an active member of Sigma Kappa Sorority, a peer leader at the Center for Leadership, and a representative for the College of Architecture and Environmental Design (CAED) on the Honors Council.

This summer Morrato had the opportunity to take part in the first Honors Abroad experience in London. “As an architecture major, I don’t have the availability to take many elective courses. By spending the summer in London, I had the opportunity to live in a different culture while taking courses I never thought were an option.” The 6-week Honors experience focused on theatre, providing unique opportunities for students to learn more about the history of community theatre throughout the city.

As a peer leader on campus, Morrato is distinguished for her leadership skills and practical experience. Her involvement on campus is inspiring. She helps first-year students in their transition to life at Cal Poly. In addition, Morrato has extensive experience with StrengthsQuest, which she uses to help her peers identify their passions and find their path. Morrato’s own strengths help explain her involvement on campus and past success.

Morrato notes the Honors Program has helped her to become more engaged in the Cal Poly community. In addition, sponsored activities and opportunities have helped her to connect her own passions and learning. She reflects positively on the small class sizes, educational opportunities, and inclusive network provided by the program. We wish her continued success in her studies here at Cal Poly and thank her for her service to the Honors Program!
This past summer, an Honors abroad program took eight Honors students ‘across the pond’ to London. Alongside 50 other Cal Poly participants, the students took courses in Comparative Economic Systems and Global Theatre and Performance. As part of the theatre course, Professor Josh Machamer, Department Chair for Theatre and Dance, developed and led an Honors experience. During the summer, the Honors students spent their days making new friends, taking classes, and exploring their home abroad. Kathleen Sones, a third-year Graphic Communications Honors student, reflected on the experience, “My favorite part was using the city as a classroom. Almost everything we learned about, we went out and saw in person.” To fulfill their Honors contract requirement, our Honors students participated in the Honors theatre experience with Professor Machamer, attending additional plays together and collaborating on a group project about community theatre. The additional experience provided the opportunity for students to synthesize all they had learned over the six-week program.
Another Honors contract opportunity during this past summer had one of our architecture students, Emma Ferguson, working for Urban Frame in Boston. The Urban Frame program focuses on providing young people with the opportunity to give their ideas a voice through designing and building in real spaces. Dr. Daniel Hewett, a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, recognized Emma’s leadership potential when she participated in the program in 2014. Dr. Hewett offered her the chance to serve as a Teaching Assistant for new young designers. Emma’s young students saw the zombie-like people texting while walking as a problem in Boston; they designed a plan to redirect cluttered foot traffic. On Massachusetts Avenue in Central Square, they laid down bright tape and colorful creations to keep make distracted walkers subconsciously walk in a lane, steering them away from obstacles like bike racks and other people. Emma reflected positively on the experience. Watching kids grasp abstract concepts and seeing their design ideas come to life was an extremely fulfilling part of the internship contract.

These are just two examples of Honors Contracts completed this past summer by our students. A common misconception amongst students is that to be part of the Honors program, a student must add extra courses to an already weighty class schedule. However, contracts offer the opportunity for flexibility. They represent ways in which students may count co-curricular, extracurricular, and service activities for an Honors credit, encouraging students to participate more fully and reflect more deeply on the significance of their experience. So, whether you’re interning at your dream job, spending a quarter exploring the museums of a foreign country, or giving back to a community, be sure to consider an Honors contract. Getting an Honors credit simultaneously seems like a pretty sweet deal to me. How about you?

Photos from Emma Ferguson’s trip to Boston: URBANFRAME projects.
Each year since 1966 the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) has sponsored a conference for collegiate Honors colleges and programs across the nation. The event serves as an opportunity for students, faculty, and staff to exchange ideas and share best practices. This year, the 51st Annual NCHC Conference was held at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Seattle. The theme of the conference was “Know Yourself.”

The conference included over 150 different seminars over a period of three days, including informative presentations, workshops, meetings, roundtable discussions, and poster sessions. The seminars covered a wide range of Honors-related topics, from discourses on the benefits of community partnerships, to tips on how to overcome obstacles within Honors programs, to advice on how to successfully implement a variety of different leadership experiences. A team of three Cal Poly Honors staff members and four students made the journey to Seattle this year—Director Gregg Fiegel, Administrative Support Coordinator, Shane McKeague, Honors faculty member, Tom Trice, Honors, Student Assistants Sarah Larkin, Colton Marino, and Amber Miller, and Honors Council member Alec DerMatoian. The team ‘divided and conquered’ the conference, attending as many seminars as possible and gathering a wide breadth of information. In between seminars and other conference events, the team enjoyed opportunities to get to know one another over dinner and seeing the sights of Seattle. Next year’s conference will be held in the fall in Atlanta. If you’re interested in giving back to the program, this activity represents a great opportunity for you. Let us know if you are interested!
The Honors Program is happy to feature Theatre and Dance instructor Heidi Nees in this quarter’s faculty spotlight! Professor Nees’ passion for theatre and teaching is obvious in a first meeting with her. In her courses and Honors experiences, she demonstrates tremendous enthusiasm while weaving together themes and topics related to theatre, history, diversity, and inclusion. Nees’ approach to teaching was inspired, in part, by past work at a YMCA in Los Angeles teaching children’s classes. She took on this position after deciding to take a break from acting and theatre. Originally from a small town in Ohio, Nees recalled her experience in Los Angeles, noting that “meeting people who were different from the people I knew from my own town helped me to gain a lot of perspective.” In her courses, Nees emphasizes to her students that they empathize with others and examine issues from multiple perspectives, furthering the interdisciplinary goals of the Honors Program.

Nees teaches the Introduction to Theatre class (TH 210) for the Theatre and Dance Department. In support of this course, she often offers a linked seminar exclusively for Honors students (HNRS 299). An Honors group seminar allows participants to engage in Honors-level work as an enrichment to a standard non-Honors course and to experience this enrichment in the context of an Honors-level peer group. This quarter, the students in Nees’ seminar are investigating the popular musical Hamilton as a case study, which she says “uses a historiographic approach to look at the founding fathers.”

This historiographic style is also an approach Nees herself takes in teaching. Says Nees: “in talking about theatre history, I take a historiographic approach to studying the past, not just looking at what happened in the past but how do we talk about and construct narratives and stories about the past,” as well as whose voices are included and/or manipulated. Nees emphasizes that theatre classes are fun and can be applicable to any major. “I think at the core, anything you study at school asks you to take in knowledge, reflect on it, make a claim on it, and then support that claim. So hopefully being able to do that in different ways and with different topics strengthens that skill.” Great advice!

Be sure to watch for Professor Nees’ Theatre History and Introduction to Theatre classes as GE Area C3 electives. She also teaches Topics in Diversity on the American Stage as a GE Area C4 elective and USCP requirement!
Hello to our new students and welcome back to our continuing Honors scholars! The staff and student assistants of the Honors Program wish you all a fantastic academic year. I wanted to alert you to some changes to the University Honors Program PolyLearn site, which all of you have access to via the Cal Poly Portal. This site represents an on-line handbook that we hope you will reference frequently during your time with us. You’ll find the site under the “Other PolyLearn Access” tab on your Portal homepage.

The site is updated regularly with important announcements regarding program events, guest speakers, course scheduling, advising matters, deadlines, co-curricular opportunities, and student accomplishments. In addition, the site details program requirements, policies, and procedures. We also summarize Honors course options and provide specific instructions for requesting credit under a number of independent study/contract options. I encourage you to take a few minutes to read through the ENTIRE site – there’s a lot of valuable information available on multiple pages and levels. We hope this site becomes your go to resource for Honors announcements and information. As always, the staff in the Honors office are happy to answer any questions you have regarding posted information. Please visit us in the office when you can!

Dr. Gregg Fiegel, Honors Program Director

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