

## Scholars Reinvention Committee Report and Recommendation

In January 2010, Provost Aprille appointed the *ad hoc* Scholars Reinvention Committee (the “Committee” or the “SRC”) to devise a program to replace the University Scholars Program. The SRC herewith submits its report, which includes a design for a new program, tentatively called the “John Elrod Society.”

### *INTRODUCTION: The Formation of the Committee and the Committee’s Work*

The Committee’s work followed on that of a previous committee, the University Scholars Review Committee (the “Review Committee”), which had recommended that the University Scholars Program be terminated, and that a replacement program be substituted for it.<sup>1</sup>

In response to the Review Committee’s recommendations, the faculty approved a motion at their November 2009 meeting directing the Provost to create a committee to develop a program to replace the University Scholars. The motion passed by the faculty included the following:

*"The University Scholars Review Committee has proposed that a re-envisioned undergraduate program be established, consistent with the talents of our best current undergraduate students and with the goals of the College and Williams School. Consistent with this recommendation the Committee moves that.....[t]he Provost be charged to create a small ad hoc committee to design as a recommendation to the undergraduate faculty a new program that aims to enrich the intellectual life of students and the campus as a whole in accord with the recommendations found in the Committee's report ([http://www.wlu.edu/Documents/provost/UniversityScholarsReview\\_June2009.pdf](http://www.wlu.edu/Documents/provost/UniversityScholarsReview_June2009.pdf).)"*

In her charge to the Committee, the Provost asked that committee members be mindful of the following points:

- Consider ways to coordinate any new program with others like the Johnson Scholars enrichment program, the Woodrow Wilson Speakers Program, the Public Lectures Fund, etc. In addition to making better use of existing resources, such coordination may avoid adding more events to an already crowded annual university schedule.
- Be very cautious about advocating for any curriculum-based components which would require additional resources. The prevailing need and desire seems to be

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<sup>1</sup> The Review Committee’s report, dated June 2009, is available on the Provost’s website at [http://www.wlu.edu/Documents/provost/UniversityScholarsReview\\_June2009.pdf](http://www.wlu.edu/Documents/provost/UniversityScholarsReview_June2009.pdf).

more for co-curricular opportunities that will enrich the experience of our most capable and intellectually curious students.

- Please consider that not all intellectually-minded students are necessarily top academic performers. A program that is open to interested students may be preferable to one that has an exclusive selection process.

The Committee members, drawn from both the faculty and student body,<sup>2</sup> met weekly throughout February and March. Committee members reviewed honors programs at our peer institutions, spoke with the former head of University Scholars, and discussed different possible models for a replacement program. Finally, the Committee drew up a proposal for a replacement program, described below.

### *RECOMMENDATION*

We propose below a program—provisionally called the John Elrod Society (JES, or the Society)-- to replace the discontinued University Scholars. The purpose of the Society will be to encourage intellectual discussion in informal settings among a group of dedicated students and faculty members. The Society will provide a forum for realizing one of the most important goals of Washington and Lee as articulated in its Mission Statement—specifically, to develop “students’ capacity to think freely, critically, and humanely.” The Society seeks to achieve this by fostering intellectual conversation in an informal, ungraded setting.

We have chosen the name “John Elrod Society” in memory of former Washington and Lee President John Elrod, who emphasized the importance of conversation in an academic community, and who exemplified the ideals of civility, scholarly engagement and articulateness that the Society seeks to encourage in its members.

Although the University Scholars program as initially designed seemed to have outlived its usefulness, nonetheless there remains a sore need for intellectual conversation in a diverse, academically gifted student community. Although such conversation ought not to be confined to the classroom, students and faculty alike have indicated that it is often difficult finding an opportunity in a busy campus life for such exchanges in less formal settings. The John Elrod Society-- the result of a collaborative effort by students and faculty-- is an attempt to make such a forum available.

The Society will contribute to several other initiatives underway to strengthen the intellectual life on campus, and will provide an alternative social outlet, where students of

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<sup>2</sup> Committee members included Kevin Crotty (Classics; chair), Robert Strong (Politics; Associate Provost), Françoise Fregnac-Clave (Romance Languages), Sandra Reiter (Business Administration), Jonathan Eastwood (Sociology), Erich Uffelman (Chemistry), Elliott O’Brien (Senior), Samantha Copping (Junior), and Maya Iyengar (Junior). Profs. Strong and Fregnac-Clave had earlier served on the University Scholars Review Committee.

both sexes can interact in an alcohol- and drug-free environment. We believe that the presence of the John Elrod Society, a unique educational initiative at Washington and Lee, will also be a useful recruitment device.

### *A Brief Description of the Proposed John Elrod Society*

The John Elrod Society will serve at least one of University Scholars' three purposes—i.e., “to facilitate opportunity for discourse among our most prepared students.” The Society will expand on this goal, however, by recognizing that the students most interested in intellectual discourse are not in all cases those with the highest grade-point average. Accordingly, the program is open to interested students, whatever their GPA.

Students wishing to participate in the program will be obliged to take the “gateway” course, described below, in order to establish a common or core intellectual background. The bulk of the program, however, will consist in meetings in the evening—ideally, every two weeks-- to discuss topics loosely arranged around a subject area that students themselves will devise, possibly in consultation with interested faculty members.

In line with the informality of the program, participation in it will not be recognized on the student's transcript.

While the Society will need a faculty member to head the program, the discussions will be organized primarily by the students. Additionally, we hope that faculty participation in the JES will not be confined to the program head. The Society will provide a forum not only for students, but for faculty, too, to engage with colleagues and students in an informal setting.

The program requires only modest resources. On the staffing side, the proposed John Elrod Society needs a faculty advisor, an instructor for the core course, professors willing to host one or more informal discussions, as well as a staff member and a work-study student. The Society should also have a dedicated space on campus.

We set forth below details concerning the administration and component parts of the program.

### *Admission/Recruitment*

In order to become a participant in the Society, a student must take the gateway course, described below. The course should normally be taken during the student's first or second year. The program does not require any particular GPA. Admission will be on a first-come, first-serve basis. Students wishing to take the course should submit a brief statement (no more than 250 words) of their reasons for wishing to participate in the program.

We are assuming that the numbers of students interested in the program will be about 30 per year. (Our assumption is based on the fact that participation in the program will not

be recorded on the student's academic transcript.) Should the program attract a larger number of students, it will be necessary to revisit the admission procedures.

At least for the first two years of the program, a junior or senior wishing to participate need not take the gateway course, but should write a brief essay explaining his or her interest in the program and setting forth a possible subject area for discussions.

Student members will publicize the Society and annually recruit new members through such venues as first-year orientation, the Academic Fair, and the Campus Activities Fair. Advisors, especially first-year advisors, will also be asked to bring the Society and its gateway course to the attention of interested students.

### *The Gateway Course*

The gateway course (JES 101) will be a three-credit course, and should have no more than approximately 15 students. In order to prepare students to discuss a wide variety of specific topics, the course will explore a subject that will be of interest and relevant to the subject matters of the informal discussions, whatever these may be. For example, the gateway course might explore the nature of knowledge, viewed from the perspective of various disciplines—philosophical, sociological, and economic.

That is just an example. Whatever the topic, the gateway course, as envisioned by the committee, should have three features: (1) it should entail a variety of disciplines; (2) it should address broad topics (e.g., perspectives on knowledge, or happiness, or justice), rather than specific, practical issues; and (3) it should serve as a “module”—that is, it should be useful to students whatever other courses they choose to study during their time here at Washington and Lee. The purpose of the gateway course is to provide a common core of knowledge to facilitate the informal discussions.

The course will count as part of the instructor's annual teaching load. Ideally, this course will be offered in both the fall and the winter terms.

### *The Program of Informal Discussions*

The program of informal discussions lies at the heart of the John Elrod Society. Each term, there will be several informal discussions amongst the participating students and a faculty member. Ideally, these discussions will happen bi-weekly, and will revolve around a common theme to agreed upon by participating students and the faculty advisor. The subject matter of these discussions need not be the same as that of the gateway course. The faculty person will ask students to read a book, or listen to a piece of music, or watch a film, and then meet to discuss it on a set day or evening. The idea is not to present an assigned subject in a formal way, but rather to open the floor to conversation about a shared experience. These discussions should last about 90 minutes, and might be accompanied by a meal or refreshments. The discussions could take place at the professor's home, at locations off-campus, where appropriate, or in a dedicated space on

campus (see below, under “Space”). The students will not be graded on their participation or the quality of their responses.

### *Governance*

The Society will need a faculty advisor, to be appointed by the Provost from a body of volunteers. The faculty advisor will serve for a term of two years. The advisor, in consultation with other interested faculty members and participating students, will organize the gateway course and the schedule of informal discussions, and help recruit other faculty members to participate in the program each year. Ideally, faculty members will be willing to commit to participate for more than one year in order to help anchor the program.

Because the group will be largely student-run, the students should elect two co-presidents, and a secretary.

The co-presidents will be responsible for organizing an annual meeting (or series of meetings) of student participants and the faculty advisor to discuss the subject matters of the gateway course and the informal discussions. (This meeting or series of meetings should normally take place in the winter term, to organize the program for the next academic year.) The co-presidents, together with the faculty advisor, will organize the recruitment and scheduling of professors interested in participating in the informal discussion program. In addition, the co-presidents will be responsible for overseeing recruitment of new student members in the program. Finally, the co-presidents will also see to the smooth operation of the biweekly discussions and serve as the contact persons in the event of any emergency or need to change plans.

The secretary will record minutes of the yearly organization meeting, and any other meetings of the participants and faculty advisor. The secretary will also assist the co-presidents, where necessary, in the smooth operation of the bi-weekly discussions.

### *Staffing*

The JES should also have a designated staff member to attend to various administrative tasks, including, for example, oversight of the JES website and the recording of public lectures, as well as assistance in organizing and publicizing the biweekly meetings. A work-study student might help with website maintenance and the recording of public lectures.

### *Space*

To ensure that the program has a continuing identity, the JES needs to have a dedicated space, where student members can meet informally for conversation. Ideally, the space would include a small kitchen and an eating area. At the least, however, such a space should have shelving to house a small library of works used or referred to in the gateway

course or in the informal discussions. The space might contain, in addition, an archive of recordings of lectures on campus by visitors. The space should also be equipped with chairs, lamps and desks, so that program participants can use the space to continue discussions from the gateway course or bi-weekly meetings. The space might also house video and recording equipment, to record and memorialize lectures or other events on campus.

#### *Sakai Site*

The JES should have its own Sakai site for communications amongst members concerning upcoming meetings and discussions, as well as on-line forums.

#### *Outreach*

The JES hopes to promote not only intellectual conversation among its members, but also in the academic community in general. To that end, the JES should have a public website for coordinating and publicizing public lectures on campus, and for storing digitized recordings of lectures.

#### *Budget*

The JES needs an annual budget, not less than that of the University Scholars, to help finance the costs of the biweekly discussions, and to invite guest speakers to the gateway course, arrange possible field trips in connection with the gateway course or the informal discussions, as well as to purchase equipment for the JES space.

#### *Possible Future Expansion of the John Elrod Society*

While we recommend that John Elrod Society activities take the above form in its first years, we urge the administration and the faculty advisor for the program, as well as the student participants, to bear in mind the possibility of expanding the JES in years to come as it matures.

The program director should explore, together with the students, the possibility of forging ties with one or more of the several lecture funds on campus—including the Johnson Lecture Series or the Woodrow Wilson Lecture series. We envision student participants in the JES working to identify and invite speakers to these or other series, and organizing the biweekly discussions around the topic to be addressed by the visiting lecturer. JES students would then meet with lecturers during their visit to campus.

Another idea is to guarantee funds for JES students to support the costs of travel to student conferences and/or summer research.

