

# **Distinction Programs in Dedman College**

***A Report to Dean William Tsutsui***

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## **I. Current State of Distinction Programs on Campus**

As the caliber of SMU's students has risen dramatically over the last decade, an effort has been underway to offer more academic challenges and intellectual richness as part of the educational experience. Enhancements such as the University Honors Program (open to qualified students of all majors) is one example of this effort. Across the campus, schools are implementing Distinction programs—the Lyle School of Engineering recently approved a Distinction program, and the Cox School has a reorganized honors program. The Meadows School of the Arts also has thriving distinction programs within most of its divisions—Art History students in particular have turned out impressive thesis work. A distinction program at SMU generally means a high level of research and scholarship—that must be fully reviewed and approved by a faculty committee in the student's discipline(s). Beyond a student's individual major, the implementation of the new University Curriculum with its Capstone requirement will certainly foster not only greater demand for substantive Distinction programs, but will also help build an expectation that these senior level projects are to be a serious academic experience. Through programs such as the Hamilton and Richter Fellowships, the Big iDea Grants, and the Unbridled Learning Program, there is a stated institutional commitment to undergraduate research.

Dedman College has become part of this movement toward an enriched academic challenge, and with the further impetus of a new Dean and efforts such as the new Interdisciplinary Institute, and the Dedman College Scholars Program the time seems appropriate to re-examine the distinction programs available in the College.

To assess the state of distinction programs in Dedman College, the Committee surveyed department chairs and directors of undergraduate study. A review of each academic

department in the college revealed two clear facts: first, virtually each major, with its own dedicated faculty, offers some form of a distinction program. Second, an extremely small number of students actually participate in these programs. In general the departments with the largest faculty offer the most developed Distinction programs—Anthropology—which awards about 5 students distinction each year; and English—which awards from 6 to 10 students Distinction annually. Other large departments supporting Distinction programs are History which awards 2 to 3 students each year, Political Science which awards 2 to 6, and Religious Studies 1 or 2. Also of note, the Economics Department, with its high number of majors, limits its Distinction program to the absolute top 1 or 2 stellar students—virtually ensuring that it is unavailable for many who would be willing and able to undertake such sustained research. The Science departments all have Distinction programs but put very few students through them annually, due to limited time and laboratory research space. Finally, in a positive development the Psychology, Markets and Culture, Sociology, and the Spanish area of the World Languages department all have recently created Distinction programs. (The other areas of World Languages all eventually plan to have Distinction programs as well).

At present, of the 16 departments in Dedman College, 15 offer distinction programs for their majors. The most glaring omission is found in the Mathematics department. Currently, it does not have a distinction option. In addition, select minors currently have distinction programs. By our estimate currently only about 20 to 24 students in Dedman College (out of a total of approximately 700 graduates per year) participate in departmental distinction programs, although that number is rising every year.

Please see Appendix A for a complete listing of Dedman College major and minor departments with their corresponding Distinction programs.

## **II. Recommendations**

This committee has six recommendations intended to promote distinction programs across the College. We assume that faculty are in favor of providing this option for their most academically promising students, although we have no supporting data. We also assume that students would benefit from distinction programs. From our vantage point, our strongest students would not only thrive from engaging in a substantial research project but it could serve as an important credential for their graduate or professional school applications. Finally, we believe that by adopting these recommendations the College will be continuing the very public work of changing the campus culture—toward one that rewards and celebrates undergraduate excellence in research, writing, and other intellectual enterprises.

**Recommendation # 1.** Each department should have a Distinction program of its own. The program should be publicized and described in the course catalogue. We recommend using a

standard criterion of 3.5 grade point average in the major to qualify for consideration in a Distinction Program. In departments without the resources to offer separate Distinction Programs, it would be possible to use advanced coursework as a place where such independent work could take place.

**Recommendation # 2.** Each department should increase distinction opportunities for its students. Towards this end, we propose two concrete goals. First, 5% of Dedman College graduates will be involved in a distinction program by 2014. Second, by 2016 that percent will go to 10% and remain there. With about 700 graduates per academic year in the College, the target numbers of Distinction projects would be 35 by 2014 and 70 by 2016. With the new distinction programs beginning in Psychology, Sociology, and Markets and Culture, the first goal can certainly be achieved.

**Recommendation # 3.** Create Interdisciplinary Capstone or Distinction courses or opportunities affiliated with the Interdisciplinary Institute. Professor Brettell has mentioned the possibility of Interdisciplinary “Honors” Distinction or Capstone classes sponsored by the Institute. Such courses would be limited to students who successfully apply to participate—and to those who are pursuing a double major. This opportunity would allow the College to lead by example—to cultivate more students for distinction program and draw departments into the movement by illustrating in a concrete way what their best students can produce—and its tangible benefits.

**Recommendation # 4.** Recognition of Dedman College Distinction Students and Faculty Mentors at the Honors Convocation: at present Dedman College departments do not publicly recognize their Distinction candidates at the Honors Convocation. There are years when “the best senior in Sociology,” etc., is recognized—but a clear recognition is not given to departmental Distinction candidates. It is recommended that all those pursuing Distinction be recognized—even if some in the end are not successful in completing it to their faculty’s satisfaction. Instituting this special recognition at the Honors Convocation would send a clear message out to the university community. Finally, the proposal could be very easily achieved—beginning as early as May of 2013.

**Recommendation # 5.** Create Public Presentation Opportunities for Distinction Students: currently students present their research findings and projects in various public venues—from the Hamilton Scholars and the Richter Fellows, the Big iDeas Grants, to the newly launched UnBridled Learning Fellows. Similarly, under the new University Curriculum all SMU students will be completing a senior level of Capstone project, and the University Honors Program students will be enrolling in a 1 credit Honors Peer Group Seminar during the same semester as the Capstone Project. In this 1 credit course students will meet periodically with a professor and their peers discussing the nuts and bolts of how the Capstone project is coming together. The culmination of this course is a public presentation on his or her research by each student.

We propose that each Dedman College distinction candidate have this type of opportunity—to present his or her original research in a public setting. It would also be desirable for the College to present the 2 or 3 most impressive student presentations in a high profile event sponsored by the College.

**Recommendation # 6.** Create an official celebration of Distinction students and their faculty mentors by the College. Such a reception should be hosted by the Dean and department chairs and would honor distinction candidates and their faculty mentors. This reception could be an informal time for mingling, with brief remarks and the naming of each distinction candidate, his or her faculty advisor, and project title. Holding this reception in the Rotunda of Dallas Hall would be desirable: again sending out the message of the high esteem in which the College holds these students and their academic successes.

### **III. Greatest Challenges & Needs**

Ultimately, it is the commitment at the departmental and college administration level that will determine how far and how fast Dedman College is able to significantly expand its distinction programs. The three key components of this collective effort will be:

**+Faculty time at the department level—with departmental commitment and resources**

**+Support from the College to encourage departmental commitment**

**+Support from the College and departments for the Interdisciplinary Institute's Capstone and/or Distinction courses**

Greater and quicker success will be achieved if tangible incentives are introduced. One obvious incentive would be to credit a faculty member's service in mentoring these distinction students in his or her service reported to the University. A more costly incentive would be to provide a course release once a faculty member had mentored a significant number (say 10) of these senior projects.

As the College is poised to lead the University in a time of exciting change—by becoming the focus of the Capital Campaign, and supporting the foundation of the new University Curriculum, it will become even more important to include our undergraduate students in this process and to highlight their academic scholarship. For over a hundred years Dedman College has been the leader in undergraduate teaching and scholarship—and at this time more than any other a clear commitment to intellectually dynamic distinction programs is of critical importance—and will send a powerful message to the SMU community and beyond.