PLAN II: “A RENAISSANCE EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY”

“My child and my money go to Plan II and I don’t know what it is!” More than one anxious parent has made this confession to me in my two years as interim director of the Plan II Honors Program. (In fact, we’ve heard it so often at Plan II that we’ve turned it into a bumper sticker.) I’ve also heard more informed critics worry—with the best of intentions—that Plan II, the “jewel in the crown of the College of Liberal Arts,” is losing its luster and its relevance in the 21st century. Now as permanent director of Plan II, I want to take this opportunity to explain the core curriculum of Plan II and its relevance in any century as well as some of the initiatives we’ve taken to change the face, if not the soul, of Plan II Honors.

In 2008, Plan II remains dedicated to its original purpose of providing a rich, classical education, in the words of its founder Dean H. T. Parlin, an “education for life, not just for a living.” Our aim is to produce literate men and women with a broad base of knowledge, the intellectual nimbleness and skills to adapt to any circumstance, and the prudence to understand the ethical consequences of their actions. We want to instill in them a love of learning of its own sake and give them the tools to learn whatever they want for their own sakes.

For those reasons, the core curriculum of Plan II continues to include, among other things, the study of world literature, philosophy, higher mathematics, logic and the foundational sciences of physics and biology. In a world of rapid change and shifting values, these disciplines teach us much about where we’ve been, where to go, and how to get there. The world waits, a wise friend once said to me, and we never know what it has in store for us. We do know that having a Plan II degree, the “educational equivalent of a Swiss Army knife,” leaves one prepared for anything.

The core of Plan II includes not just classical subjects and natural sciences but thematic “TCs” or seminars. These change regularly and offer Plan II students topics as varied as “Community and Place,” “Right and Wrong in Politics,” “Punishment in a Liberal Society,” “Disease, Development, and Democracy in Post-Colonial Africa,” “Modern Caribbean Cultures,” “Medical Ethics in the Real World,” “Legal Perspectives of the War on Terrorism,” and “Science, Economics, and Politics of Energy.” These courses allow Plan II students to marry the contemporary with the classical.

Although a classical education of arts and sciences rather than vocational or pre-professional training remains at the heart of Plan II, we recognize that earning a living is a part of life. The program is elastic enough to allow many of its students to round out their Plan II major with more focused majors such as economics or history and other degrees in engineering, business, and architecture, to name but a few. Plan II has also created a thorough system of advising that now includes a “career week” of talks, workshops, and panels, many of them presented by Plan II alumni eager to light the paths of those who are following them.
Plan II stresses more than ever the value of study abroad in the 21st century and puts its money—more than $1 million—where its mouth is (thanks largely to a gift last year from Plan II alumnus Austin Ligon). This year alone Plan II helped over 100 of its students to strengthen their academic portfolios overseas with more than $200,000 in scholarships. Indeed some of that money had a multiplier effect within the University by freeing up scholarships for students outside of Plan II. Plan II has even developed what we see as the first of a series of our own study-abroad courses, this one in Rome under Professor Karl Galinsky, that extends Plan II’s reputation and reach globally.

Nor has Plan II ignored what’s happening locally. Last year Plan II forged a partnership with KIPP (“Knowledge Is Power Program”) of Austin. The nationwide system of charter schools serves groups underrepresented at universities with the aim of sending them to college. Some 80 percent of KIPP graduates, most of whose families have never attended an institution of higher learning, go on to college. Next year Plan II will provide nearly 30 mentors for young “Kipsters,” grades 5 through 8. Many of those mentors will also take a Plan II service-learning course to acquaint them with innovative approaches to education and mentoring and some, like Jennifer Whiddon, will go on to become teaching fellows at the KIPP school. At home and abroad, Plan II’s name and its students are moving beyond the confines of university life.

As the Plan II Honors Program approaches its 75th year in 2010, we polish the “jewel in the crown” every day without ever losing sight of its classical cut. We’re not done yet. We aim to make the Plan II Honors Program, as we like to say, a “Renaissance Education for the 21st Century.”

Michael Stoff
Director, Plan II Honors Program