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Ask just about any person in the world who Brad Pitt is, and you’ll be lucky to find someone who doesn’t know. Britney Spears has screeched her way to radio stations from Ireland to Indonesia. But how many of you have heard of Jun Ji-hyun, possibly South Korea’s number-one actress, and arguably an international superstar? Or Amr Diab, the most popular singer of music in Arabic for the last two decades? Unless you have roots in these particular areas of the world, I’m willing to bet not.

Since World War II, the U.S. status as international hegemon has permitted it to export its pop culture all over the world, making it the primary destination for any actor or vocalist who wants to make it to the top. Unfortunately, I don’t think this status is deserved. While I like American movies and music as much as the next person, as an avid fan of international cinema and “world” music (a ridiculously vague catch-all term), I know many countries produce entertainment at least as good as ours, so why should everyone be held to our standards? Why doesn’t international entertainment make deeper inroads here? Is it that we don’t want to read subtitles? Dubbed movies would be better than nothing.

Okay, so what about crossover artists, you might argue? Shakira, Colombian pop-rock sensation, has had multiple major hits in the United States, first from her Spanish albums that appealed mainly to U.S. Latinos, and then mainstream from her English debut in 2001. But the key here is English. To have any rapport with mainstream America, she had to abandon her native tongue. And is it coincidence that she turned blonde just in time for her first English album, and has kept her hair that unnatural color ever since? In other words, her music is only palatable to pop radio here when it’s done in English and when her image is Americanized.

And what about the recent spate of American remakes of hugely popular East Asian films? Rather than bring movies like Japan’s Ringu and Ju-On or Hong Kong’s Infernal Affairs directly to American theatres, execs here prefer to steal the plotlines and fashion American versions (The Ring, The Grudge, and the just-released The Departed). South Korea’s release five years ago of the Chinese Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (dubbed into English), and a few other wushu (martial arts) films since have paved the way for this year’s Fearless, in wide-release, and subtitled.

Convinced you should try out some foreign music and movies, but don’t know where to start? The internet is a great jumping-off point. Or, even more conveniently, you could check out any one of the multiple international film festivals held at SMU every year, such as this weekend’s Japanese Film Festival (click to smujapanclub.com for more information), which will be showing, among other movies, the aforementioned Japanese original of The Ring. Admission is free, so show up so you can brag to all your friends about how cultured you are!

Monica Chavez is a junior political science and foreign languages major.
Top ten series gets it wrong by equating intelligent students with Honors Program students

by Caitlin Sharp

Todd Baty’s article last week called for an inclusion of SMU’s undergraduate elite in policy making and curriculum development. He pointed to a need for the best and brightest undergrads to pull up our general curriculum and admissions standards. The elite must be an example to our applicants and our administrative leadership. I can agree with the need for advancement and Baty’s call to student action. Where he missed, however, is in labeling that “elite” as necessarily honors students.

The honors students at SMU are offered unique and challenging opportunities within a well-developed (although constantly improving) program. But I cannot emphasize enough — an honors student does not an intellectual make. And vis versa. The “smartest, most academically-minded” students on our campus are not readily distinguishable by a few H’s next to their course section number. Joining the Honors Program is a choice, albeit a choice not extended to all, but a choice nonetheless. There are plenty of intelligent people who were overlooked for invitation (as any selection process has its flaws) as well as plenty of intelligent people who just didn’t have room in their schedules to fill particular requirements.

This is not to say that Baty painted vicious stereotypes, but labeling those that didn’t read The French Lieutenant’s Woman as under-qualified or incapable of advising the President and Board is dangerously close. This is not a black and white situation, in which Honors students represent the pinnacle of intellectual development (see: all black clothing except for the occasional red Che Guevera t-shirt, emo-glasses, tendency to over-quote Hemingway and list books like 1984 as “favorites” on Facebook) nor does the non-honors student represent a stereotypically vacuous mind (see: popped collar polo except for the occasional Corona t-shirt – naturally acquired on last years’ Cabo with the girlz!!!’ spring break trip, tendency to over-quote “Sex and the City” and proudly exclaim “I don’t read” on that category on Facebook). The fact of the matter is that there is intelligence everywhere at SMU, being cultivated in classrooms, concerts, and columns across campus, and the Honors Program does not hold exclusive claim to it.

But let’s get to the point I’m assuming Baty was (rightfully) making: SMU isn’t exactly known for its culture of academia, per se, and if want the brightest high school seniors to flock to the Hilltop we need to employ our brightest undergrads. We need to move away from our unofficial but rather widespread marketing motto: “at SMU, we work hard, and play hard” (raise eyebrows and nudge elbow at prospective student, implying unimaginable things about their upcoming collegiate ‘experimentation’ phase). We talk about SMU undergraduates’ high “social capital” and networking possibilities instead of research opportunities and discussion groups. Instead of being promised they’ll rush with the future CEO’s of Fortune 500’s, prospective students should see what is really best about SMU: the opportunity to challenge one’s self in a variety of fields, and emerge refined not only in leadership ability but also in intellectual capabilities.

Notice that I said opportunity. No amount of intellectual sophistication is guaranteed in a degree from, well, anywhere. Choosing to challenge one’s self here is a choice much harder to sustain than checking a simple “Accept” box on an invitation card to the Honors Program. We know from grade inflation statistics and the line out the door of Home Bar on Thursdays that it’s pretty easy to just get by. I take it that what Baty was really calling for were the students that have chosen differently. The Mustangs that attend lectures that aren’t required for class, apply for research grants, write for campus publications, develop relationships with professors, and seek out the hardest courses in their fields. Certainly the Honors Program is designed to stimulate a probing curiosity and refine intelligence into academic capability, and I credit its courses with much of my success. But it isn’t only the only program at SMU that can make one question, discuss, think, and philosophize. I expect a close examination of the Student Trustees’ (past, current, and future) records would show a demonstrated pattern of self-motivation toward challenges in both leadership and academia.

Creating a culture of intellectual initiative and building a reputation for advanced academia is SMU’s next project. It will take faculty, administrators, and all sorts of student leadership, not just an arbitrary measure of a sort of “Talented Tenth” (to use, unabashedly, a historically and politically loaded term). Whether it’s a Richter Fellowship or acceptance into the Paul Taylor Dance Company, SMU students are achieving great things. Let’s not pigeonhole that achievement.

Caitlin Sharp is a senior political science major in the University Honors Program. She has been known to quote “Sex and the City” on her Facebook Profile.

Do you have an opinion about... politics, music, class, television, football, shopping, intramurals, fraternities, movies, tests, the Mavs, sex, restaurants, religion, sororities, driving, study abroad, Umphrey Lee, fashion, news, the war, parking, technology, magazines, bars, baseball, the weather, professors, the Mustang Band, dating, books, nightclubs, Texas, the Daily Campus, pets, club sports, or anything else?

we’re listening at hilltopics@hotmail.com
Tomorrow night is a big night for SMU, and it’s up to the students to make it a success

by Douglas Hill

Halloween. When we’re young, it means free candy and no bedtime. As we get older, the treats become less important, and we concentrate on the tricks: smashing pumpkins and toilet papering homes. By the time we get to college, Halloween has become a pointless and curious affair, as it becomes the one day each year when even the good girls get dressed up in their nurse outfits with backless tops and devil costumes with three-inch skirts—a strange sort of pastime for women and a blessing we men choose never to question.

But this year, Halloween means something bigger. Halloween is normally a time when college kids wear too few clothes and drink too much booze for no particular reason, but this year Mustangs actually do have a reason—or at least a justification—for their behavior: the football team plays UAB tonight.

Any SMU student knows that we, as a student body, need no excuse to throw a party, and tomorrow night (on a Tuesday, no less), the administration is practically BEGGING us to party. They’re letting those of us of legal age drink on campus without fear of arrest. They’re encouraging students to spend their Tuesday evening supporting the football team instead of studying. They stopped just short of canceling classes, but they’re even going to bring ESPN2 here to catch the whole sordid affair on live television. Indeed, we owe it to the administration and to ourselves not to screw this one up.

Be in the stadium this Tuesday. Wear red (that devil costume with the three-skirt could come in handy). Be loud. Bring your “Willis for Prez” signs. Watch the team roll over the UAB Blazers. Stay for the whole game. Do whatever you can to make this holiday the best ever on the Hilltop.

As a senior who was here to witness the painful winless season three years ago, I know how lucky we are to have a team that can win this game and can even make a bowl game. It would be a shame if when ESPN2 shows up to film the contest, Mustang fans are still on the Boulevard. Or at Home Bar. Or in their fraternity brother’s apartment. Or anywhere else besides the student section at Ford Stadium. People all over the nation will be watching SMU; let’s be sure to show them that we’re out to give Halloween a purpose again.

And that purpose is kicking UAB’s ass on national TV.

As you support the team, please remember to be safe. If you drink, drink in moderation, and never get behind the wheel drunk.

Douglas Hill is a senior international studies major.
Todd Baty presents number 5 of the top 10 things I love about SMU. This week: the UHP

#5: The University Honors Program

Consistently misunderstood and misrepresented, the purpose of the University Honors Program is simple:

“The University Honors Program allows highly engaged and motivated students of all schools and majors to enhance the academic experience of SMU by satisfying the Liberal Arts General Education Curriculum in small, discussion-based classes. Though Honors students are high achievers, the Program extends beyond the work in the classroom to the development of a community of scholars—students and faculty—who relish the challenge and adventure of the life of the mind. In so doing, the University Honors Program serves as the intellectual heart of SMU, broadens students’ perspectives, and raises the level of discourse across campus.” (UHP Missions Statement, November 2004)

Thus, the purpose of the University Honors Program is to develop within its students the basic tenets of a true liberal arts education: critical writing, analytical reading, and intellectual reasoning—the tenets that should serve as the foundation of any undergraduate education.

But perhaps the reason why students (both in and outside of the program) misunderstand the University Honors Program has not to do with its purpose or function, but its value. Unlike degree tracts or major course work, the University Honors Program curriculum has no specialty, no particular subject focus, and certainly no agenda. Thus, by design, the University Honors Program experience is largely student defined—all members have the ability and, indeed, responsibility to craft their own experiences within the program’s confines.

However, because the program is dependent upon students taking responsibility and action in creating their education, many people are confused as to the UHP’s usefulness: “Why should my GPA suffer when I won’t ever use this ‘stuff’ in my life anyways?” But here again, the purpose of the UHP is misunderstood. Its purpose is not to create specialist or professionals in any certain field, but rather to create “specialists” in learning. The University Honors Program affords students the opportunity to explore a variety of interests intimately, placing priority on learning “how to learn and think” rather than learning “what to know.” This program epitomizes everything that an undergraduate education should be, and greatly enhances an otherwise inadequate General Education Curriculum. (There is an added element of “educating the electorate” which goes hand-in-hand with the importance of learning through programs like the GEC and UHP, but I will not dive into that in this column and reserve that topic for another Hilltopics installment.)

However, perhaps I should be more pointed in my remarks. Essentially, the purpose of the University Honors Program is not to teach its students skills or knowledge that will “directly” apply to their future careers. Yes, that means Civil Engineering students will learn how to analyze poetry, just like Music students will be expected to write essays of historical analysis. The purpose of the University Honors Program is to provide fundamental skills that everyone, regardless of major or future occupation, needs to call him or herself “educated.” Undergraduate school is not intended to be a time for specialization. It is intended to be a time for intellectual exploration, discovery, and growth—and that those are precisely the goals that the University Honors Program hopes to achieve.

So Honors students, do not be dismayed when you are faced with the extra challenges of an Honors class; enjoy the ride, and savor the experience. The University Honors Program is to your benefit, and you will be rewarded when you are one of the few (if not the only one) at the office who has knowledge outside the workings of a cubicle.

Next week.....#4: SMU students

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