

FREDERIK MEIJER HONORS COLLEGE ANNUAL REPORT

JULY 2026



Emily St. John Mandel discusses her book Station Eleven via Zoom with the “Dangerous Ideas” first-year sequence taught by David Eick and Ellen Adams (photo by Cory Morse)



**FREDERIK MEIJER
HONORS COLLEGE**
GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY®

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Our Evolving Program

As you'll see below under [Honors Conferences](#), a handful of our students and staff attended the October 2025 meeting of the National Society for Minorities in Honors. It was the tenth anniversary gathering, and the theme of the conference was, "Where are we now, where are we going?" That seems like a fitting theme for this report, as I'll be starting my tenth year as Honors College director this fall. It has been a decade of both growth and change: a curriculum overhaul, a global pandemic, several years of dropping enrollment, and then several years of surging enrollment. Running through it all has been a basic but challenging question: "What does it mean to be an Honors student?" It's a question whose answer naturally evolves over time, and how we answer it impacts everything from our recruitment and orientation efforts to our teaching, programming, and budgeting practices.

As we described in our [2023 Annual Report](#), the Meijer Honors College has embraced a more inclusive recruitment and admissions approach. Inspired by leaders of the National Collegiate Honors Council who challenged us to rethink who "belongs" in Honors, and following GVSU's own decision to go "test-optional" in Fall 2020, thus opening the university to new and different populations, we began reading applications more for signs of engagement and potential than for static indicators of past achievement. The move from high school to college is meant to be a transformative one—a new beginning, an opportunity for students to point themselves in new directions. With our revised curriculum in place, we were eager to welcome students ready to embrace topical, interdisciplinary, discussion-based courses and a vibrant community of ambitious student leaders. At recruitment events, we described our community as one filled with interesting, engaging, and inspiring students. The first step in becoming an *interesting* upper-level Honors student, we said, was to be an *interested* first-year student. Interested students become interesting people. Engaged students become engaging people. Inspired students become inspiring people. If prospective students could commit to becoming interested, engaged, and inspired, we were prepared to welcome them into our community. And, I should add, it feels good to be open and welcoming. We are proud of our curriculum and the Honors community, and we want as many students as possible to experience it.

Part of our effort reflected our desire to better represent the university community. Honors programs nationwide tend to lag behind their schools in terms of diversity. In Fall 2014, barely 7% of Honors students here at Grand Valley identified as part of a racial or ethnic minority. By Fall 2020, the percentage had risen to 12.5%. In Fall 2025, it was 19%, much improved but still well behind the university mark of 28.5%. There is no reason we should not more closely reflect the full university community, and we continue to move in that direction.

Around the time we unveiled our new curriculum, GVSU's Admissions team expanded its outreach, adopted the Common App, and revamped its on-campus recruitment activities, and beginning in the 2022-23 admissions cycle, we saw a great increase in both GVSU and Honors applications. From 2020-22, our entering Honors class ranged from 321 to 346 students; from 2023-25, it ranged from 402 to 442.

As a result of all these efforts, the "profile" of both the GVSU and Honors population has changed. Through 2019, Honors advertised a "normal expectation" of an ACT of at least 28 or an SAT of at least 1300, and these students historically made up the bulk of our students. In Fall 2015, for example, GVSU enrolled 707 first-year students who met the 28/1300 threshold, and Honors enrolled 339 of them (80% of our first-year class of 424). GVSU now has far fewer students who enter the university with those kinds of scores. By Fall 2025, the university enrolled just 280 of these

28/1300 students, and Honors enrolled 104 of them (24% of our first-year class of 442). This new demographic profile challenges traditional notions of what an Honors student is. We now have many students who likely would not have been admitted to Honors ten years ago. This is a good time to reflect on our current student population and how they're doing.

First, it's worth noting that throughout this period the Honors College has maintained a steady share of GVSU's overall first-year class. In Fall 2015, Honors enrolled 10.2% of GVSU's entering class. In Fall 2025, we enrolled 10.0%. The average Honors share of the overall first-year class since 2015 has been 9.4%. This fall, it looks to be just under 9%. As the student population at GVSU has evolved, then, so has the Honors population, but we continue to represent 8% to 10% of the undergraduate population.

As we've reviewed Honors applications these past few years, we have of course looked for evidence of success in school (last year, 92% of our entering students had a high school GPA of at least 3.5, and the average was 3.82), but we've also focused on signs of engagement (participation and leadership in clubs, sports, artistic performance, volunteering, and part-time work), ambition (as seen in self-reflections), and academic and intellectual promise (as seen in writing samples). Still, by the measure of standardized test scores, some of our students may not fit the profile of the traditional Honors student. Indeed, from 2019 to 2025, we enrolled 359 students (13% of the total) with ACT below 22 or SAT below 1100. Here's how they've done:

- 86% have graduated from or remained at GVSU
- 80% have graduated from or remained in Honors
- Of those who remained in Honors, 84% have a GPA above 3.00
- Of the 71 who left Honors, 27 left with a GPA above 3.00

Altogether, 88% of these "low-scoring" students have either stayed in Honors or left with a solid GPA. They may face different academic challenges than earlier Honors cohorts, but by any reasonable measure, they're succeeding. And they benefit from our strong, supportive community and discussion-based interdisciplinary curriculum. Our guess is that if we told an engaged, ambitious student with very good high school grades but an ACT score below 22 or an SAT score below 1100 that they have an 88% chance of doing well if they joined Honors, they'd jump at the chance.

As the following pages clearly show, students joining the Honors community find plenty of role models to interest, engage, and inspire them. Honors students develop intellectually, impact communities, gain leadership skills, build impressive credentials, and move confidently to the next stages of their lives. The Honors experience is indeed a transformative one.

As always, we are grateful for the endorsement and support of the Meijer Foundation, whose continuing partnership makes so much of what we do possible.



Roger Gilles, Director

Student Reflections

In a number of ways, including through the HNR 300 requirement, the Honors College encourages students to engage in the campus and/or local community. We asked several students how they have grown through engagement, with specific reference to the aspirational “dream clouds” they filled out during Welcome Days activities prior to their first semester at GVSU. Here’s what they said:

Will Adkins (Mathematics and Physics double-major): During Welcome Days, I was late both days. I wasn’t particularly proud of this, so I vowed to become better at completing tasks on time. I wrote on my dream cloud that I hope that by the end of my college career, I never show up late to things anymore.

I am definitely getting better at not being late to things. When I was an Honors mentor, something that I frequently reiterated to my mentees was how much you will change by the end of your freshman year within the Honors college. Whether the reasoning behind the change is the classes, the friends you make, or the opportunities you now have, all that is certain is that there will be change. For me, the change was tutoring.



The good thing about working an on-campus job is that it motivates you to be your best all of the time. For example, not only am I now encouraged to be on time for my appointments because, well, I don’t want to be fired, but, even more so, I want to spend as much time helping someone understand the content as I can! Through tutoring, I have also learned how to be an effective communicator, because if I want to help students from various backgrounds succeed in their coursework, I must learn how to help students from *all* backgrounds succeed. Furthermore, I have become better at leading my peers to a common understanding of course material, even if we conceptualize topics in different ways.



Working in the tutoring center, I have become better at not being late to things that matter; I have also grown into the type of person I would be comfortable reaching out to for help, and have continued along my process of wanting to grow into someone who embodies the Honors College through community service and continual growth.

Hannah Reda (Medical Laboratory Science major): When I came to GVSU and the Honors College, my biggest goal was to put myself out there. I didn’t have very many friends, was quite shy, and felt like I didn’t belong in many rooms. I wanted so badly to be a leader and a self-starter, but was too nervous about what everyone else would think. Now, three years into the program, I can happily say

that I have been blessed beyond relief in regards to my dream. My first year on campus I made more friends than I could've imagined, and the following year my circle just kept growing. Now I feel like I make a new friend everywhere I go. Not to mention I have the opportunity to be a part of a variety of different campus organizations and spread my wings into Campus Life.



Ethan Fulton (Allied Health Sciences, pre-PA, Psychology minor): When I think of the Honors College, I don't think about myself or my individual journey, but rather about community and relationships. When you initially get to college, it can be very easy to get consumed with what you're going to do with your life and your individual grades, but it is so much more than that. Honors has given me relationships and helped me get in touch with multiple communities. My work in the Trinity Health Grand Haven emergency room directly supports the goals that the Honors College has instilled in me. Working in an emergency room allows me to interact with large numbers of people from different backgrounds, cultures, and life experiences. Because of the Honors College, I feel

that I am able to go into each situation I am put into with an open, helping mind, because you never know what someone is going through. This has allowed me to form tons of relationships and help people who aren't having a good day have a little bit better of a day. My Honors experience is being advanced through this because I am learning outside the classroom and in real world situations. This requires me to think critically and make fast decisions for what I am going to say and what I am going to do. The main thing that is being advanced is having a deeper appreciation for being a part of something that is so much bigger than myself.



Olivia Mulka (Journalism major, Writing minor): My goal when I applied to the Honors College was to build a community on campus. I purposefully applied to schools that were not close to home so I could have new experiences and get out on my own. However, starting out in a new place was still frightening, and I worried about finding my space and people on campus. The Honors program promised a close-knit community and avenues to find your place at GVSU, and this is what drew me to apply.

A pillar of the Honors program is to engage with the GVSU community and beyond in addition to understanding different communities. The main reason I want to become a journalist is to connect with others and share important stories. Through my honors activities, I have been able to accomplish this goal.

The first one is being the Writing Director for the [494 Magazine Club](#). I lead a team of writers, run fashion shows, model, and direct photoshoots. I have been able to engage and display the creativity of the GVSU and Grand Rapids community. For example, I have written and worked with multiple thrift stores in downtown Grand Rapids to promote small businesses and spread their mission of sustainability. I also did a faculty spotlight on Honors professor Dr. Veléz Ortiz, called “Punk Prof,” to show the creativity and resilience of faculty at Grand Valley.

I also have positions at the GVSU Promotions Office and at the *Lanthorn*. At the Promotions Office, I am the Digital Content Manager for the [Laker Weekly Newsletter](#). Students’ interests and voices are at the heart of the newsletter. Through this position, I am able to reach the entire student body and display ways they can engage with others on campus. We constantly brainstorm how we can get more students passionate about being involved and celebrate those who are. At the *Lanthorn*, we promote understanding and write about shared communal concerns. I have written articles about University changes, such as [AI usage](#), [public safety concerns](#), and [workers’ rights](#). As the Assistant News Editor, I have the responsibility to ensure articles are written clearly so the *Lanthorn* can effectively communicate with the student body and keep others informed.

Overall, these activities allow me to engage and communicate with the GVSU community and the Grand Rapids community while also gaining a deeper understanding of those around me.

Awards and Scholarships

University Awards. Since 2015, 16 of the 23 undergraduate winners of the university’s top annual award, the prestigious Glenn A. Niemeyer Award, which recognizes well-rounded students who demonstrate excellence in both the classroom and extra-curricular activities that enrich their lives and the lives of others, have been Honors students—a tribute both to the quality of students we attract and to the growth our students experience while in the program.

This year, **Annika Mattson**, a Mechanical Engineering major with a Mathematics minor, was one of two GVSU undergraduates to win the Niemeyer Award. Besides excelling the classroom and interning for three semesters with Nissan North America, Annika served as president of the Laker Racing Formula Society of Automotive Engineers (FSAE) team. She and her student colleagues designed and constructed race cars for competitions. Annika herself ran social media and led the team’s aerodynamics and composites group. She graduated in May 2026 and plans to attend Michigan Tech to pursue a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering.



Each year, every academic program names one “Excellence-in-a-Discipline” awardee, and again this year many Honors students were so honored:

Hailey Bos, Advertising and Public Relations

Kallie Crouch, Writing

Rosanna Damuth, Mechanical Engineering

Jordan Edwards, Mathematics

Sophie Gemmen, Political Science

River Koehler, German

Makenna May, Biomedical Sciences

Francesca Petrucci, Allied Health Sciences

Olivia Pitsch, Spanish

Haley Powers, Cell and Molecular Biology

Hannah Pruski, Elementary Teaching

Dennis Rennels, Radiation Therapy

Noah Seim, International Relations

Kailey Washburn, Classics

Anna Whipple, Honors College

Benjamin Zwart, Natural Resources Management



Hailey Bos, an Advertising & Public Relations major, served as Account Executive of the National Student Advertising Competition Team and placed third in Districts. She was also president of the GVSU Ski and Snowboard Club. She completed internships with Buckle, Posh Petals, and GVSU's REP4 program. As part of her work at REP4, Hailey helped to develop an app, [FinLit](#), that empowers students in their journey to financial independence.



Dennis Rennels, a Radiation Therapy major, completed clinical rotations at MHP Radiation Oncology in Farmington Hills, UM Health Sparrow in Lansing, and Lemmen Holton Cancer Pavilion in Grand Rapids. He served as social media manager of the Ultimate Frisbee Club, and in the summer of 2024 he studied abroad in the Netherlands.

Honors Awards. At our May 2026 senior recognition ceremony, the Honors faculty were pleased to present Honors-specific awards to two outstanding graduates. **Anna Whipple**, a Nursing major, was named Outstanding Senior—the Honors College “Excellence-in-a-Discipline” awardee. Professor Jeremiah Cataldo presented the award.

On her way to graduating with a perfect 4.0 GPA in the highly competitive Nursing program, Anna stood out as a classroom leader in the “Powers That Divide Us” first-year Honors sequence and the “Textual Tease” section of HNR 350, both taught by Professor Cataldo (and Professor Cimitile in the sequence). She was a member of the Campus Ministry leadership team and, as her Honors Senior Project, she conducted research on the topic of waterbirth outcomes and implications for nursing. She presented her research during Student Scholars Day in 2026.



The 2026 award for Outstanding Leadership and Service in Honors went to **Haley Powers**, a Cell & Molecular Biology major with a certificate in Bioinformatics and Genomics. Honors director Roger Gilles presented the award.

Haley, whose final GPA was a mere 3.993 (an A- in HNR 251—thanks, Professor Greer!), was the Excellence-in-a-Discipline Award winner in the Cell & Molecular Biology program and was named an outstanding student there all four years of her undergraduate career. She interned with the Michigan State Police and served on the GVSU Cold Case Investigation team. In Honors, Haley served as a peer mentor, an HNR 201 TA, and a mentor in the Young PIs Summer Scholars Program. In 2023 she joined the Honors Student Council, where she served as president in 2024-25. She was also a fellow in the Cook Leadership Academy.



Honors Scholarships. Nearly all first-year Honors students earn either the Laker Scholarship, the Award for Excellence Scholarship, the Faculty Scholarship, or the Presidential Scholarship—as well as other more narrowly defined scholarships. In addition, we have a handful of Honors-specific scholarships: the Frederik Meijer First Generation Honors College Student Scholarship, the Donna K. Brooks Presidential Scholarship, the Arend D. and Nancy Lubbers University Honors College Scholarship, the Zukaitis Honors Scholarship, the Ruth Chamberlain Global Issues Scholarship, the Jonathan and Marcia White Honors College Scholarship, and the Jeff “Dr. J” Chamberlain Honors Scholarship. Dozens of our current students have received these scholarships to help them along the way to their degree. Here are updates on the activities of selected recipients. Like most of our students, these young people are doing wonderful things!

The **Frederik Meijer First Generation Honors College Student Scholarship** is a renewable full-tuition scholarship for especially promising students who are first in their family to pursue a college degree.

- **Melanie Avila** (PreK-6 Education) interned as an Undergraduate Research Fellow with the Council on Undergraduate Research and presented her research at the 2026 Michigan Reading Association conference. In addition to serving as an Honors peer mentor, she has worked as an undergraduate research assistant for two GVSU professors and Activities Director of the Campus Activities Board.
- **Maddie Buckles** (Biomedical Sciences) has worked as an undergraduate research assistant for two GVSU professors and as a teaching assistant in the Cadaver Lab.
- **Genesis Giron-Ayala** (Biomedical Sciences, with minors in Chemistry and Psychology) works as a nurse technician at Corewell Health in Grand Rapids. She has served as an Honors peer mentor and an orientation leader with Laker Familia.
- **Nyma Hossain** (Biomedical Sciences) will begin her second year at GVSU working as a consultant in the Writing Center and as a Structured Learning Assistant in Biology.
- **Declan Raimor** (Occupational Safety & Health Management, with an Environmental and Sustainability Studies minor) has served as an Honors peer mentor and a member of the Laker Marching Band.

The **Arend D. & Nancy Lubbers Honors College Scholarship** is a renewable scholarship of up to \$4,000 annually intended for students with exceptionally strong entering credentials (HS GPA and ACT/SAT scores).

- **Madeline Arthur** (Biochemistry, with minors in Chemistry and Spanish) studied abroad in Seville, Spain, in summer 2025. For the past two years, Madi has worked as a student assistant in the Honors College office. She is also an Honors College peer mentor.
- **Landon Birchmeier** (Science Secondary Education) is a member of the board of GVSU’s United Sports, and he’s also an Honors peer mentor and member of the Honors Student Council.
- **Gabrielle Godin** (Computer Engineering, with a Mathematics minor) has for the past two summers interned with Array of Engineers in Grand Rapids. She also works at GVSU’s Atomic Object Technology Showcase in Zumberge Library.
- **Mia Maliepaard** (Statistics and Mathematics) currently serves as a Medicare Advantage intern with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan. For the past two years, she has worked as a tutor and Structured Learning Assistant at GVSU.

- **Isabelle Moore** (Mechanical Engineering, with a Mathematics minor) has for the past two summers interned with AirLife in Grand Rapids. She also works as an engineering tutor and serves on the board of GVSU's American Society of Mechanical Engineers.
- **Thomas Phillips** (Actuarial Sciences, with minors in Mathematics and Spanish) spends his summer working at Camp Arcadia in Arcadia, MI. For the past two years, he has worked as a GVSU Admissions Ambassador. He is also an Honors peer mentor and member of the Honors Student Council. He is a member of the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society.
- **Clara Shooks** (Biomedical Sciences, with a Spanish minor) has for the past two years worked as an ophthalmic technician for Retina Specialists of Michigan.
- **Vivian Tackett-Irwin** (Accounting and Psychology) studied abroad at John Cabot University in Rome this summer. For the past two years, she has worked as a peer mentor, a tutor, and a Structured Learning Assistant at GVSU.
- **Connor VanDrunen** (Computer Science) has for the past two years worked as a software engineering intern with DLN Integrated Systems in Wyoming, MI. In summer 2024, he studied abroad in Switzerland learning about Data Science and Artificial Intelligence. He is a four-year member of the Laker Marching Band.

The **Zukaitis Honors Scholarship** is a renewable needs-based \$1,000 scholarship.

- **Addy Bernhardt** (Marketing and Management) is a marketing and communications intern at RENK America, a defense and space manufacturing firm in Muskegon. She serves as an Honors peer mentor, a board member of GVSU's Rotaract Club, and a member of the Women in Business Club.
- **Lex Elder** (Criminal Justice and Psychology) is president of the Forensic Science Club and serves as a fellow in GVSU's Cook Leadership Academy.
- **Rylee Hotchkiss** (Biomedical Sciences, with a Chemistry minor) serves as an Honors peer mentor and on the programming committee of the Honors Student Council.
- **Regina LaValle** (Behavioral Neuroscience and Psychology) works as a student assistant in the GVSU Career Center and serves as Activities Director of the Campus Activities Board and an Alcohol and Other Drugs peer educator. In 2025, she studied abroad in Ireland as part of the "Psychology of Peace, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland" program.
- **Hope Palmer** (Microbiology) is conducting research with Biology Professor Sarah Hamsher, and this past year she was named a fellow in GVSU's Cook Leadership Academy.

The **Jeff ("Dr. J") Chamberlain Honors Scholarship** is a renewable \$1,000 scholarship that assists students of all kinds.

- **Mya Dever** (Environmental and Sustainability Studies, with a History minor) studied the ecology of Western Ireland at the University of Galway in summer 2024. She also completed an internship with HillTop Greenhouse and Farms, facilitating the preparation of farmers market produce and plant care.

The **Ruth Chamberlain Global Issues Scholarship** is a renewable scholarship providing up to \$2,000 annually to students with a career interest in solving global problems.

- **Emz Prestly** (Natural Resources and Environmental Management, with an Applied Statistics minor) is a student manager for the Laker Food Co. and is active with the Renaissance Festival Club.

Grad School Plans

Many of this year's Honors graduates have plans for graduate school. Here are a few:

- **Sophia Ackerson** will attend law school at Michigan State University
- **Erika Collier** will attend the Professional Accounting program at the University of Texas
- **Ella Compau** will attend law school at Michigan State University
- **Cassandra Conn** will attend the Accountancy program at Walsh College
- **Lydia Denning** will attend law school at Marquette University
- **Meagan Frania** will attend dental school at the University of Pittsburgh
- **Jenna Gill** will attend veterinary nursing school at Purdue University
- **Margaret Gonzalez** will attend the program in School Psychology at Loyola University Chicago
- **Kayla Helferich** will attend the program in Behavioral Analysis Professional Practice at the Florida Institute of Technology
- **Eleanor Martin** will attend the Healthcare Administration program at the University of Michigan
- **Annika Mattson** will attend the program in Mechanical Engineering at Michigan Technological University
- **Pranav Nalam** will attend medical school at Duke University
- **Ava Politi** will attend the School of Information at the University of Michigan
- **Brittany Pomierski** will attend the Physician Assistant program at Eastern Michigan University
- **Lizette Solorio** will attend medical school at the Michigan State College of Human Medicine
- **Kylie VanDenBerge** will attend the Clinical Mental Health Counseling program at Western Michigan University
- **Sophie Wildemann** will attend the School of Molecular & Cellular Biology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Many of our graduates, including these, will pursue graduate degrees right here at Grand Valley:

- **Giselle Balivet** will attend the Social Work program
- **Kaia Barnhardt** will attend the Nursing program
- **Hailey Chycinski** will attend the Occupational Therapy program
- **Alexa Edwards** will attend the Physician Assistant program
- **Grace Groothuis** will attend the Health Administration program
- **Haarika Hebbur** will attend the Cell & Molecular Biology program
- **Parker Kennedy** will attend the Occupational Therapy program
- **Ryleigh Krise** will attend the Doctor of Physical Therapy program
- **Benjamin Maletta** will attend the Doctor of Physical Therapy program
- **Emilee Miller** will attend the Doctor of Physical Therapy program
- **Sierra Schneider** will attend the Doctor of Physical Therapy program
- **Sara Sietsema** will attend the Cell & Molecular Biology program
- **Paige Traboulay** will attend the Doctor of Audiology program
- **Brian Tran** will attend the Radiation Therapy program
- **Hannah Wilson** will attend the Social Work program
- **Paige Winkler** will attend the Social Work program

Honors Conferences

Honors students attend many discipline-specific conferences connected to their majors and minors. In addition, we regularly send students to Honors-specific conferences.

NSFMIH. Honors students regularly attend conferences in their fields of study and those focused on the Honors experience. In October 2025, **Nicole D'Arienzo, Joshua Eapen, Sam Fisher, and Braylond Price** joined Honors advisor **Kary Wickham** and Director **Roger Gilles** at the 10th Annual meeting of the National Society for Minorities in Honors. Nicole and Braylond explored the cultural and political climate currently shaping the experiences of Honors Latino students and their organizations, including our own Laker Familia and Honors Familia. Joshua reported on GVSU's inaugural Multicultural Night, which he organized in spring 2025 and which drew some 250 participants. And Sam shared their research on supports and services for autistic college students.



Nicole, Braylond, Director Gilles, Joshua, Advisor Wickham, and Sam at NSFMIH



MEHA. In April 2026, Honors students **Julia Toomey** and **Megan Van Orsdel** gave a presentation titled “Puzzle Club: Unintended Consequences in the World of Technology” at the Mideast Honors Association conference in South Bend, Indiana. They shared their experiences in creating, organizing, and guiding a successful student organization built around in-person community interaction. After its start in Fall 2024, the club became a social hot spot where students created new relationships and maintained existing ones. Julia and Megan designed and administered a membership survey that revealed positive gains in sociability, conversation, and collaboration. A majority of members reported *not* using their phones during Puzzle Club meetings.

The full paper, co-authored with Professors Lane and Lafferty of the “Design Thinking for Social Product Innovation” first-year Honors

sequence, was published in the proceedings of the 18th annual International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation, held in Seville, Spain, in November 2025.

Also attending the MEHA conference were Honors Graduate Assistant **Junora Maharjan**, Advisor **Kary Wickham**, and Director **Roger Gilles**.

Student Senate Succession

As our “Live. Learn. Lead.” motto suggests, an important goal of the Honors College is to attract and cultivate student leaders. Honors students lead in the classroom, in student organizations, as student workers, as undergraduate researchers and conference presenters, while studying abroad, as professional interns, and ultimately as Grand Valley graduates. Many of our students have served in the Student Senate and as Student Senate officers. This year, leadership of the Student Senate passed from graduating Honors student **Evan Jackson**, who served as president in 2025-26 along with Vice-President Ty Vanlerberghe, to Honors students **Lukas Hartley** (president) and **Sophie Gemmen** (vice-president) for the 2026-27 academic year. Evan, Lukas, and Sophie all took the time to reflect on their activities this past year:



Evan Jackson (Finance/Economics double-major): Senior year has not been comfortable. It pushed me in ways I did not fully anticipate. Weeks often meant meetings between exams, studying between meetings, and decisions that carried weight well beyond the classroom while leading a team representing more than 22,000 students. Those responsibilities required discipline and composure developed in real time.

That is what made the experience meaningful: spending the year building and executing without a wasted moment. One of the clearest examples was the launch of the SPARK Fund, which created a direct path for student ideas to become reality. We built infrastructure where it was needed.

I am proud of what we built and the people I built it with. It has been a privilege to lead alongside people who hold a high standard and follow through on it. Grateful is an understatement. I had the opportunity to spend my senior year investing in Grand Valley, not just passing through.

Lukas Hartley (Political Science/Legal Studies double-major): In March, I had the opportunity to spend a day in Washington, D.C., with the Student Senate Cabinet speaking to elected officials and their staffers about Grand Valley, and the benefits of federal support for higher education. This has an amazing experience, and an important reminder of how important advocacy for higher education is, now more than ever.

Then, in April, I had the opportunity to return to DC with the Fraternity and Sorority Action PAC and Phi Kappa Tau Nationals to lobby on behalf of the Greek experience. I spent two days training,



Sophie Gemmen and Lukas Hartley

and spent the third day on the Hill, meeting with elected officials, including both Senators from Michigan!

Finally, I capped off the semester being elected Student Body President of GVSU. This was a humbling experience, and I do not take the responsibility of representing a student body of over 20,000 lightly. I cannot wait to get to work alongside Sophie Gemmen, our Student Body Vice President, and the rest of our cabinet!

Sophie Gemmen (Political Science major, minors in Applied Statistics, Data Science, and Writing): First, I had the privilege of representing my peers in Washington, D.C., where I joined Grand Valley State University Student Senate leadership in advocating for higher education. Meeting with members of the Michigan delegation proved insightful and inspiring, and I look forward to continuing to support students.

I'm also proud to have been elected by the student body to serve as Vice President of Student Senate, alongside President Lukas Hartley. I am eager to take what I've learned over the last three years as a general senator and the Public Relations Chair and put everything this organization has given me back into the GVSU community. I am particularly grateful for the support I've received from my peers, predecessors, and new leadership partners.

Apart from Student Senate, I have been selected as a fellow candidate for the Peter C. Cook Leadership Academy at the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies, an opportunity I do not take lightly. Developing my leadership among peers, mentors, and community leaders will be invaluable as I near the end of my undergraduate degree and begin looking forward.

Lastly, I received two awards: the Excellence-in-a-Discipline Award for Political Science from the Office of the Provost, and the Office of Student Life Emerging Leader Award for my involvement around campus and in Student Senate. Both of these awards highlight the dedication and love I've put into my academics and extracurricular community. I am honored to have been recognized for my effort, and I am so excited to bring this momentum into my senior year in the fall.

All three students are now enjoying an active summer. Evan is working as an intern with Vision ESOP Valuation, a financial services firm located in Wyoming, MI. Lukas is serving as an Event Operations and Hockey Intern with the Meijer State Games of Michigan, part of the West Michigan Sports Commission. And Sophie continues to work part-time, as she has since 2022, at Schuler Books in Grand Rapids.

Meijer Endowed Chair: Daniel Williams

The Meijer Endowed Chair for Entrepreneurship and Innovation was established in 2009 to provide the Honors College with a distinguished expert or professor to help prepare well-rounded leaders from a liberal arts background with skills necessary to be successful in a changing global economy. According to the charter documents, the chair “should have a track record of examining issues using multiple disciplinary prisms, addressing problems collaboratively with a wide spectrum of people, and working towards creative solutions that are comprehensive and integrated.”

Meijer Endowed Chairs	
2012–2015	Bill Holsinger-Robinson
2015–2019	Linda Chamberlain
2019–2023	Rosalynn Bliss
2023–2025	Faye Richardson-Green
2025–	Daniel Williams

In Fall 2025, **Daniel Williams**, president and CEO of the Steelcase Foundation, began serving as the fifth Meijer Endowed Chair. Before joining Steelcase in 2021, Daniel served as president and CEO of the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology and as principal at Grand Rapids University Preparatory Academy. He earned his undergraduate degree from the

University of Iowa and then went on to earn an M.Ed. from Eastern Michigan University and an Ed.D. from Creighton University.

This past year, Daniel taught an HNR 350 course called Adaptive Leadership in a Changing World, where he challenged students to examine how their lived experience shapes how they see the world—and explore what it might mean “to shape the world as leaders and humans who listen critically, reflect thoughtfully, and act decisively to nurture more just, free, and joyful communities.”

On November 7 at the Seidman Center, Daniel shared lessons learned from his 20 years of leadership experience in a lively and informal talk moderated by Sonja Forte, Executive Director of the Baxter Community Center in Grand Rapids. The event, part of both the Frederik Meijer Lecture Series and the Cook Leadership Academy’s Wheelhouse Talks, was jointly sponsored by the Honors College and the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies.



Daniel Williams at the November 7 lecture

Honors Staff Award: Kary Wickham

In April 2026, Honors Academic and Enrichment Advisor **Kary Wickham** received GVSU's Academic Advising and Student Services Award for her outstanding work with Honors students and service to the university as a whole.



After earning a degree in Biopsychology from the University of Michigan in 2016 and working for two years as a lab manager at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Kary came to GVSU to complete a Master of Education degree in College Student Affairs Leadership, during which she served in the CLAS advising center. These credentials show that Kary has both scholarly and professional experience. In January 2021, she took over as the Honors Academic and Enrichment Advisor—replacing, in fact, two full-time advisors who chose to leave the university within a year of each other. In the five years since, Kary has established herself as a trusted and reliable guide for students, staff, and faculty alike, and indeed she's also trained and unofficially supervised three successive graduate assistants hired to ease her advising load of nearly 1500 students here in the Honors College.

Kary's letters of support attested to her availability, her welcoming presence, her knowledge of the university and its resources, her eager participation in recruitment, orientation, and conference activities, her careful monitoring of student progress, her start-to-finish developmental work with students, her interpersonal skills, and most of all her caring and helpful attitude. We are fortunate to have her here in the office, and we hope she stays for a long time!