Dear Colleagues:

Over the past few months, I’ve enjoyed seeing your work from a different vantage, learning the challenges you often navigate along the way, hearing your personal stories, and recognizing your accomplishment as scholars, teachers, advisors, and mentors. I value you, each of you, and I value the fine work you do within our four programs. I’m not waiting until Thanksgiving Day to be grateful.

Through steady refinement, year-in and year-out in the Honors College since 2002, we’ve accomplished wonderful things in service to the University’s mission and our students. Yet Illuminate beckons us to new heights of excellence. It invites our significant contribution to aspirational goals that can make Baylor even better. If we were to elevate our efforts in response to Illuminate’s vision, working out of our distinctive strengths as an Honors College, what would that look like?

I want to share a possible answer for which I have mounting enthusiasm.

A few select, distinguished universities offer a prestigious, honors-level degree, the Bachelor of Philosophy (B.Phil), under which various majors are offered. Typically emphasizing interdisciplinary study, rigorous curriculum, and research culminating in a thesis—all of which we do with notable success—the B.Phil. represents baccalaureate accomplishment of the first order. Where offered, it attracts academically superior students, prepares them for exceptional post-baccalaureate accomplishment, and strengthens the overall stature of the institution.

I believe our Honors College is more than capable of offering a B.Phil. that exceeds the high standards of this prized degree. Choosing to develop and propose such a degree must be the result of a shared, deliberative process. As a first step in such a process, I am encouraged by the positive reception the idea has received in preliminary consultation with Program Directors Elizabeth Corey, Phillip Donnelly, Jennifer Good, and Anne-Marie Schultz; Associate Deans Julia Hejduk and Bill Neilson; Curriculum Committee members Robert Miner and Lenore Wright; Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education Wes Null; and Provost Nancy Brickhouse.

Among other benefits, the B.Phil. would leverage Baylor’s historic strengths and the excellence of the Honors College to:

- Compete nationally for prospective students of the first rank, thereby elevating the University’s incoming student profile and public stature across the United States and the world;

- Educate exceptional young women and men through a rigorous honors-level degree characterized by enhanced academic opportunities, interdisciplinarity, individually tailored courses of study, independently pursued scholarship and research, and close faculty mentoring;
Produce graduates capable of significant leadership and service in every arena of life, drawing upon the resources of exemplary Christian understanding, critical acumen, self-knowledge, moral imagination, independent judgment, and practically useful skills;

Showcase the University’s role as a model institution that unites an unambiguously Christian educational environment; transformational undergraduate education; and research and scholarship marked by quality, impact, and visibility.

To these I would add one more. Any successful configuration of a B.Phil. will depend on contributions from each of our programs and from all of our faculty and staff. Exploring the option of offering this degree thus opens the way for new forms of partnership, mutual support, and shared vision across our four programs.

With you, I have many questions. What kind of student would find the B.Phil. an appealing degree? What new interdisciplinary majors might we offer under a B.Phil. degree? How would offering our own degree strengthen the work we do with honors students in every college and school at Baylor? Do we have the capacity to offer a B.Phil. with current resources? What new faculty and staff lines would be necessary or desirable?

To begin addressing these and other questions, I have identified a six-member task force to study the possibility of a B.Phil. within the Honors College and, if warranted, to propose a curriculum for consideration by our faculty. Members of the task force include Drs. Candi Cann (BIC), Elizabeth Corey (HON), Julia Hejduk (Dean’s Office), Jeffrey Hunt (UNSC), Scott Moore (GTX), and Melanie Nogalski (BIC). The task force will begin its work promptly, and I know task force members will receive inquiries and suggestions with gratitude as they undertake exploratory work on our behalf.

The possibility of offering our own degree to academically exceptional students is both exciting and daunting. To move in this direction takes us beyond the terrain of steady refinement and into the realm of a bold response to Illuminate. I’m convinced, however, that we’re at a strategic moment to think with vision, to explore with confidence, and—if the B.Phil. is right for us—to act with determination, thereby proving ourselves “susceptible of enlargement and development to meet the needs of all the ages to come.”

All the best,

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