



## **Rutgers–Newark Honors College offers students real-world experience**

*March 29, 2004*

### **Tara Kane**

Rutgers–Newark Honors College students have landed internships at MTV, the PBS television talk show Charlie Rose and The Star-Ledger. One lucky student even worked as a law clerk for Essex County Superior Court Judge Martin Cronin.

"It was the first time anyone could remember that a courthouse accepted an undergraduate rather than a law student for an internship," says John J. Gunkel, director of the Honors College at Rutgers–Newark.

Since taking over the undergraduate program last year, Gunkel has reshaped the curriculum to ensure that honors college students graduate with plenty of real-world experience. Through internships, independent studies and special research projects, students spend time in Newark and New York City learning practical skills and interacting with community members, while taking challenging academic courses and maintaining the consistently high marks that the program demands.

Word is getting out about the Honors College, which was established in 1998, and enrollment is climbing each year. There are nearly 400 students in the program, up from 1999 when there were just 179 students. Last fall, 126 first-year students were admitted, while in 1999 there were 25.

First-year students are accepted into the Honors College based on their high school achievements, but sophomores and juniors who perform exceptionally well in college are often invited into the program at the recommendation of Rutgers faculty. Honors College students major in the same academic studies that undergraduates in the Newark College of Arts and Sciences do but graduate with the coveted honors distinction on their transcripts. The four-year program requires students to take more challenging supplemental courses to satisfy the university's general requirements, as well as interdisciplinary seminars that emphasize experiential learning.

"Our curriculum is designed to really give students some experience as well [as challenging classes]," Gunkel said. "The things that can help the students in the long run is not more class time, but being able to develop connections and practical skills."

Before coming to Newark, Gunkel, 37, taught philosophy and government overseas for the American International University of Germany while directing the university's academic tutoring program and its honors program. He graduated magna cum laude from Washington and Lee University with a bachelor's degree in philosophy and later received master's and doctoral

degrees in philosophy from Georgetown University. Gunkel has received academic honors such as Phi Beta Kappa, National Merit Scholarship and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellowship.

Despite his own academic success, Gunkel knows that these days a high grade-point average isn't enough to guarantee a job after graduation. "Employers want to hire someone who has proven their skills outside of a classroom, and the Honors College offers several opportunities for students to work closely with Newark faculty on research projects." For example, students studying Portuguese have spent time on an oral history project interviewing Portuguese-speaking residents of Newark's Ironbound. So far, more than 100 oral history transcripts have been collected. The information will eventually be available to the public online.

Professors who teach Capstone seminars — yearlong, theme-based courses that satisfy a requirement for Honors College seniors — are encouraged to get students outside the classroom. One class planned for next fall, "Reinventing Downtown," will focus on the role cultural convention centers and sports facilities have on transforming urban areas. For that class, students will collect data in Newark and New York.

Seniors can opt to skip the Capstone seminar and instead work on an independent project. One student started his own music distribution company. Another is working on a documentary on the New Jersey lottery and plans to submit it to the Sundance Film Festival.

And then of course, there are the internships. Students have been hired to work for MTV, PBS and Bertelsmann. Others who preferred to stay close to campus have accepted internships in Newark at the Star-Ledger, Prudential Insurance and the New Jersey Performing Arts Center.

"Students in the Honors College get more of a world view as opposed to something in a textbook," says Vishad Sukul, a graduating senior and second-year honors college student who will be attending the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey this fall. Another benefit, he adds, is the individualized attention from professors.

Freshman Deena Midani has been thrilled to find the program's director, Gunkel, "surprisingly accessible." ... "I know that when I e-mail him, the next day I'll have an answer," Midani says.

As the primary adviser for Honors College first year students and sophomores, Gunkel says it is essential for him to interact with students and respond to their inquiries in a timely manner. "One of my requirements is that the Honors College not get so large that I can't talk to people," Gunkel says. Besides his administrative duties, Gunkel also teaches "Justice and Equality", a freshman course that encourages students to develop critical thinking skills.

Students find Gunkel's teaching style refreshing. It was such a great open forum, says Midani, who took the course last semester. "No matter how outlandish a student's idea was, [Gunkel] would find a way to tie it into the lesson. No one was afraid to speak — you never be worried what he was going to think."