

Professor Atlas selected next director of Honors Program

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Atlas is about to take a big "weight" onto his shoulders. Dr. Gordon Atlas that is. This summer, Atlas, professor of psychology, takes over as director of the Honors Program at Alfred University, assuming the "load" which has been securely on Dr. Paul Strong's shoulders for more than two decades. Strong, now professor emeritus of English, has retired from the University. Atlas feels up to the task. In fact, he's been contemplating this possibility for a while. A member of the faculty since 1989, Atlas has long been affiliated with the Honors Program, teaching more than 10 seminars on a variety of topics, many involving comedy and humor. "It's a 'hobby' for me; I like to keep it fun." Not long into his tenure at AU, Atlas began to think he might like to try Strong's role one day. "I always enjoyed the students. That's my primary focus," he said, adding, "When you walk into an Honors seminar you are generally overwhelmed by the interest and capacity of the students." He pointed out that in some cases the students erupt in such discussion that you "can't get a word in. They can carry on without you!" The other thing he is drawn to is the honors "culture," the bringing together of "bright, intelligent students." When Atlas heard Strong was retiring, he immediately let him know he'd be interested in taking over. But it wasn't entirely Strong's decision to make; Atlas had to go through an application/interview process with Provost Dr. Suzanne Buckley and a committee. Although he inherits a very successful program, Atlas does have some thoughts about making a few changes once he gets acclimated. "I'd like to boost the numbers, which have dwindled a bit," he said. An average of 25 students enter the program each fall. In the past there have been as many as 150 (in total enrollment) and he thinks there is an opportunity to add to the ranks by attracting qualified students after they have already been on campus a year or so. Students are invited to apply for the program based on their SAT scores, their "challenging" high school curriculum and the grades in those courses, a required essay detailing why they should be admitted to the program, and high school recommendations. The most important factors are their grades and how challenging their courses were, said Atlas. This fall, there will be 21 new students entering the program with average SAT scores of 1,290 (math and verbal). Atlas believes there is a way to grow the program from the upperclassman ranks. "I would like to encourage more applications from currently enrolled students. Faculty advisers should be encouraged to inspire such applications from their better students. Some of our absolute best current students are not in the Honors Program," he maintained. "Another idea that I would like to consider is a mentoring program in which senior Honors students serve as 'fellows' for first-year honors students," said Atlas, noting they could provide more leadership and guidance to the newcomers. Atlas would also seek more national recognition of the program. "We have former honors students who have been extremely successful in private and public enterprises; we should use this for more national attention. Also, the diversity of our honors seminars could be fruit for greater attention on a more global scale," he added. He also would like to make the Honors Program more visible, perhaps by opening the senior thesis presentations as a public event. In addition to raising the program profile, this could attract additional students, he said. "I'd like to go on record with how much I appreciate what Paul Strong has done for this program," said Atlas. "There are large shoes to fill. The spirit, humor, and innovation he brought to the program will be hard to replace. I'm the apprentice," he added. Atlas earned a doctoral degree from the University of Michigan. His current areas of research include sensitivity to criticism, depression, narcissism, person perception, explanatory styles, defense mechanism, and music appreciation and personality. He has been the recipient of four awards for teaching excellence while at Alfred University. He is a member of the American Psychological Association, the Eastern Psychological Association, and the Midwestern Psychological Association, and has presented more than a dozen papers at their professional meetings.