

116. Ashton Thomas: The Honors College

Gavin Kelly

Hey everybody. You're listening to Beyond 1894 this is the official podcast of Louisiana Tech University. My name is Gavin Kelly from the Office of University Communications, and my guest for this episode is Ashton Thomas. She is the student experience coordinator in the Honors College, the sort of new look, new format Honors College. It's pretty recent here. We're going to get into that a little bit. But Ashton, thanks for making time for us and being here with us today. Yeah, thanks for having me so student experience coordinator, you're not too far removed from being a student yourself, right?

Ashton Thomas

That is true. Yeah, I just graduated with my bachelor's degrees from here in fall of 2023,

Gavin Kelly

okay, so pretty recent. Yeah, let's, let's, let's walk back and talk about, kind of the lead up to Louisiana Tech for you, and sort of picking tech is, you know, your institution of choice, and how you decided you wanted to pursue the degrees that you did absolutely.

Ashton Thomas

So I decided to come to tech. I'm fairly local. I'm from Quitman High School, so Jackson, parish, about 2030, minutes away. And you know, my parents went to tech. I always heard about how great their experience was, and I toured a few campuses before I decided where to go. And whenever I came to tech, it just felt like the place I needed to be. What were some of those other options? Louisiana, college and centenary were the two that I physically went to. Well, I think I also went to LSU and Northwestern but yeah, I came to Louisiana Tech on a tour, and I really liked it. I got two degrees, one in English literature and one in Interdisciplinary Studies. And initially I thought I was going to go to law school, but I took a class with a professor who was just really engaging and really enthusiastic. And I left the first class with him and thought, no, that's what I want to do. So it was that, it was that professor, Ben Burke Holt, okay. Shout out, yeah. Shout out to Ben Burke Holtz. He's the best. He's actually now my master's thesis advisor. Nice. So it's exciting getting to work with him. So

Gavin Kelly

but besides the law school, part of it when that, when you sort of changed your mind there those degrees, was that something you always knew you wanted to do? At what point were you in your life when you realized what you wanted to your major for college? You know?

Ashton Thomas

Yeah, well, if I'm being honest with you, I took trigonometry my senior year of high school, and after that, decided I never wanted to take math again. Take the furthest thing from math, absolutely not. But, you know, I always enjoyed reading. I always enjoyed writing. So it seemed kind of natural for me to go into that the Interdisciplinary Studies degree came later. I was minoring in music at the time, and then I

really fell in love with Spanish, taking those classes and doing study abroad. And so it just kind of came together that I put my minors together to become an Interdisciplinary Studies degree.

Gavin Kelly

Was it? I mean, it sounds like it would have been, but it sounds like you've always taken your studies very seriously, but also, like, done your part to get involved in terms of, like, trying to do everything you can to maximize your academic time. Here is that true? Yeah,

Ashton Thomas

definitely. I I'm always kind of the nerdy person in class, you know, who would want to go get to know the professor and excited about group projects and presentations and that sort of thing. I really love school. I really enjoy learning, and I think that's part of the reason why I like working with honors students so much, because most of them are really motivated and engaged with making their education their own. Yeah, I

Gavin Kelly

agree. We'll sort of get into the again, the new look of the Honors College here in a minute, talk about the music side of things, because I this episode will come out before his episode, but we were sort of talking about Jesse Webb, who's doing music and physics. And I think it's always interesting to talk to somebody who's doing music in addition to other, you know, their main major or whatever. So talk about why it was kind of important you to keep that as part of your curriculum coming into the college

Ashton Thomas

Yeah, that's actually how I met Jesse. We were in music theory together for a couple of years, but I always did music throughout high school. I come from a very musical family, so it's always been something I was passionate about, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to do it for a career. So coming to college, I knew I wanted to be involved in music somehow. And, you know, I did choir, I did Chamber Singers, but I really, really loved music theory, so I took some music theory classes, and then ended up just making it into a minor because I enjoyed it and wanted to pursue that more. So

Gavin Kelly

at what were there? I mean, it happens to every student, but were there points during your time in undergrad, where it's it felt like a lot, you know, like trying to balance your major, your minor, and again, your, I guess, your second degree. When you decided that was something you

Ashton Thomas

could do, it did at times. It was never overwhelming to the point that I felt like I didn't have help and resources. You know, there were enough people on campus that I knew I could go to, like my professors in English if I was struggling with the paper, or, you know, tutors and professors in the music department if I needed help with some of the songs or theories that we were learning. So I always felt supported. But there definitely were times. Is where it it seemed like a lot, yeah,

Gavin Kelly

again, I think that that's something that every student goes through. I think being a part of, because you were a part of honors, I was so I think that helps too, that you sort of get, maybe not an inside look, but you experience a little bit of a different curriculum in the sense that it, it's, again, smaller classes, more focused subjects a lot of the time, and the advantages of being able to register early and things like that always help. But going through the Honors Program, I think, was obviously a key factor in you staying on and being a part of the honors college now. So talk about how that came about, I guess, was that something you sought out upon graduation was kind of wanting to stay on with the Honors College, or where you approached, as you know, we're doing a new thing here, and be good if you were a part of it.

Ashton Thomas

Yeah, good question. So I think, well, first I want to say that in my time as an undergraduate, I think some of my favorite classes that I took were in honors. I really appreciated, like you mentioned, the smaller class sizes, it's more engaging. You get to know your faculty members better. But I also really appreciated the interdisciplinary perspectives. So you could take honors classes, where you could study literature through historical lens, or you could study science through an anthropological lens, and how it relates to society. So I really enjoyed those unique classes while I was an undergrad. So I graduated with my bachelor's degree, and as I pursued my master's, in my first year, I was a teaching assistant for the English department, and I taught English 101, I really enjoyed it, but I was looking for something more full time, a way to maybe engage with more students than I could just teaching one class a quarter. So I heard about the Honors position, and the Honors College had kind of began reorganizing at the end of my time as an undergraduate. So I wasn't fully aware of all the changes, but I knew there were new, exciting things happening. So I met Dr stake and applied and history from there. Yeah, it's been good so far for you, huh? Yeah, I've enjoyed it. I really like working with honors students. I really like promoting the programs and the things that we're kind of restructuring to be involved in, because I think it's important for the students.

Gavin Kelly

So let's talk about the Honors College. So previously, you know, the university was kind of as far as honors efforts goes, just kind of the Honors Program, which a lot of people might be a little bit can I'll let you explain a little bit confused on Honors Program, Honors College. But now the honors program is part of the Honors College, along with other areas of campus that have been pulled in, right? So, so walk us through kind of the new structure of the Honors College

Ashton Thomas

definitely. So as you mentioned previously, it was the honors program which we still house. But we always tell prospective students that honors is not supposed to be more difficult, right? Sometimes students come in from a high school setting and they think of honors as like AP classes and more work and more stress. But honors at Tech isn't supposed to be like that. It's an enriched experience for students who want more than just going to class and getting a degree. And so because of that, we've kind of restructured the college to house programs, for example, the University Honors Program, which are the honors classes that we've talked about a little but now we also house undergraduate research and service learning nationally competitive awards and scholarships and study abroad. So all of these things are ways that students can engage in their education beyond just showing up to class every day.

Gavin Kelly

And also, you know, you can be a part of the honor. You can necessarily not being in the Honors Program, but still be a part of the Honors College, but being a part of these other Exactly. I'm sure there's a lot of overlap, though, with those students

Ashton Thomas

in there, right? Yeah, there is. And we we consider any student who goes above and beyond, any student who goes the extra mile, through things like nationally competitive awards, study abroad, undergraduate research, we consider them to be honors students because they're, you know, going above and beyond. Even if they're not in honors classes, they're involved in all these extra things that makes them honor students.

Gavin Kelly

So you mentioned an enriched experience, and you mentioned, like, a prospective student, what is kind of the pitch to a student who's maybe, you know, eligible for honors, but on the fence, or is, or has the question like, well, what's in it for me? What am I going to get out of the Honors College? Out of the Honors Program? Yeah,

Ashton Thomas

well, I think an important thing for prospective students to consider is what they want to get out of their time at Tech. So, you know, there's a lot of benefits of applying for honors. A lot of the freshmen will say the biggest benefit is the early registration and the smaller class sizes, and those are really good, and those are important. But you know, if a student comes in and they want to engage with their major and they want to learn the content matter in these courses in a different, more enriched way, honors classes are the way to do that, not just because they're smaller, but also because, you know, whenever you. Have those smaller classes, it's easier to engage with the content in a different way. If you have a class of 20, you're probably going to learn more than you would in a class of 150 so you know, there are the benefits on the front end, like the early registration and we now have University Hall as kind of the home of the Honors College. So honor students have key card access. We have a student lounge in there with a coffee bar, TVs, games. They can come in there, they can study. And so they get those, you know, tangible benefits, but maybe the more intangible is the experience they get through those honors classes. Yeah,

Gavin Kelly

and also, so, I mean, like, we know this, we've both been through what was formerly the program and is now under the college. But like, if honors is something that you're capable of doing as a student, you should probably

Ashton Thomas

do it. Yeah, there's really no downside, right, right? And, unlike

Gavin Kelly

you said, it's not, I think, and this was maybe my fear, too, coming in is like, Oh, it's just it's gonna be harder class. This is gonna be the same stuff I normally have to take but it's just gonna be harder because it's gonna be higher standards and smaller, you know, more intimate settings and but that's never really necessarily the case. I think in every instance where it felt like it may have been more challenging, it was just because we were doing kind of more focused work that was felt more applicable to the subject.

Ashton Thomas

Yeah, so, you know, the courses you're supposed to be learning the same content, whether you take an honor section or a non honor section. The difference is the way you engage with the content. We also tell incoming students you don't have to take anything extra the honors classes you take to 21 hour program that's integrated into your curriculum. So if you're, you know, an English major, you'll take some honors English classes, and you would have had to take those anyway, right? You just take honors versions. So it's not really anything on top of your major,

Gavin Kelly

right? And then I know that sometimes, like, you get a class that's it could count for an English credit or a history credit, just because the subject matter of the class is, is diverse in that way?

Ashton Thomas

Yeah, exactly one of the ways we've restructured, you know, I kind of mentioned the different programs that are under the Honors College umbrella, but we've kind of focused the honors classes a little more to be about our core values. So the first one is global perspective. And of course, right? I mentioned that honors now houses study abroad. So of course, that's part of it as well. But we want our students to understand that they don't only exist in the context of their hometown, yeah, and kind of expand their perspective, to understand that, you know, whatever they do, wherever they work, after they graduate, they'll be with people from different cultural backgrounds, from different communities, and being able to exist within that global perspective is important. We also emphasize integrative learning, which is kind of what I've mentioned with the interdisciplinary aspect, but it's also recognizing how you know all of these general ed requirements, even if they're not in your major, there's a common thread that you can link so all the classes work together for your entire degree. And then the third is anti fragility. So a lot of people talk about resilience, which is getting knocked down and standing back up, but a lot of times, you know, honor students may get to college, and they've never failed anything before, and so anti fragility is about whenever you fail, you don't just stand back up, but you're able to move forward and grow through that failure. So those are kind of the values that we base our honors classes around, and the core value that we as the college emphasize is self reflection. So students come to Louisiana Tech and whether they're honors or not, they're going to get a great education, because tech academically is just a really good school. But while students often understand the how and the what to do, they don't always have the room to think about why it's important. So we've recently implemented an E portfolio that Joel steak and I kind of take care of on the front end with those students as they're coming in, and we give them yearly reflections, where we prompt them and guide them to kind of think about how they've changed as a person, how their education has played a role in that, and what their goals are, and they upload that to the E portfolio at the end of each year.

Gavin Kelly

Yeah, it definitely sounds like and I know this already, but I know it's true that the shift from Honors Program to an Honors College with different programs within it was not like a lot of thought was put into it. It wasn't a decision taken lightly. So the pillars for what it stands for and what it represents and what it is were set up ahead of time. Yes,

Ashton Thomas

definitely. And I kind of came on right after we became a college and so it was Dr Joel steak and Dr Joe cosky, who really, you know, we're able to build this out and plan out all of these things, and it's really exciting to see how they all come together and how they're all working together to support the students.

Gavin Kelly

Yeah, and I think too, you know, you mentioned this while you were just talking about the philosophy of the college and how it like, it doesn't matter what your major is, there's something in the honor. First college for you. And because I think it could be easy to sort of look at the honors program curriculum and maybe say, Well, this favors, you know, the more liberal arts type, English and and that sort of thing. But it's not necessarily always the case. And I think too that the type of student that passes through honors is a type of student that like is important to preserve in the college setting. I think the Honors College, that's just part of the values that that they is like the learning to learn and appreciating learning, right? Exactly.

Ashton Thomas

I think that's really important appreciating learning. And you mentioned that a lot of people think of honors, or honors colleges as liberal arts focused. But, you know, a majority of our students in the Honors College are stem and so it's, it's like I mentioned with the integrative learning, right? It's pointing out how these liberal arts facets that people focus on, as well as the STEM fields, like the undergraduate research, can work together, and you really need all of these things, which is why I think it's great, you know, we have students from all five colleges, and so bringing together all five colleges, all of the different majors, to kind of form an entire view of your education, I think, is important. Yeah,

Gavin Kelly

I agree. I agree. So sitting here talking with you about the Honors College, I mean, it's clear that you're invested in the mission of it, and you understand, and you're, you know, it sounds like you're a good spokesperson to prospective students. And you're, you know, you're in a good place here. But my question now is, so after you get this master's degree, then what you know? I'm, yeah, selfishly, I'm sure we would all like for you to stick around. What are your What are your sort of future plans? What's your vision?

Ashton Thomas

Well, I kind of mentioned earlier, ultimately, I really enjoyed teaching last year, and so the goal would be, maybe to teach in some capacity. But the more I work with honor students, the more I, like you mentioned, I'm invested. And so being able to teach, maybe from an honors perspective, be able to teach some honors courses, and hopefully eventually get a PhD. Because, like I said, I love learning. I think education is important. So want to be in school as long as I can.

Gavin Kelly

Yeah. I mean, stick around in Louisiana, tech, they'll take care. You can knock all that here. So I guess looking back at this is kind of a question I've thought of recently for some of our guests, who are, you know, have graduated maybe more in the last few years. But if you look back at the student you were when you came to tech, you know, your first quarter here, versus who you are now working on campus, getting an advanced degree, that sort of thing, what kind of have you learned about yourself? What do you think is different about you then versus now. It's existential. We like to get nice and existential right here,

Ashton Thomas

existential crisis person. But I guess looking back, whenever I started college, like I mentioned, I really liked Tech, I liked the community, I liked the scholarships. But looking back, I always thought I would graduate and I would move away to some big city, you know, to do something successful, that's that's what I thought. I thought to be successful, I had to move somewhere bigger. But the longer I've been here, the more I've realized that's not really true. Yeah, you know, the community that we have here, in the people that I've been able to make connections with, and the people I've been able to meet, you don't necessarily have to move away, you know, to build the kind of life that you want and to have the kind of career that you're invested in and interested in. And so I think that's probably the biggest difference between freshman college Ashton versus me now, is that I've kind of realized wherever you are, you can make it what you want it to be you don't have to move off somewhere to find what you're looking for.

Gavin Kelly

Good answer to a hard question. Nice job. Also, yeah, like, it's easy to become attached to Russ and to tech and to like plant roots. You know, within just your first couple quarters here as a student, it's easy to like, make friendships and get used to the city, yeah. So it's

Ashton Thomas

and I started college the year of COVID 19, yeah. And so, you know, looking back, it was difficult to meet people at first, but not really, if that makes sense, like it was a difficult time because we weren't able to have as many events. And, you know, everyone was in masks and everything. But even through my classes, I was still able to make friends because of the community that Tech offers. And I think if I had gone somewhere else, I wouldn't have had that.

Gavin Kelly

Yeah, yeah. Again, the I've said it 100 times on this podcast by now, but it's because our guests keep saying it in the sense of like the campus feels like home, family, feel close knit, whatever. All that stuff kind of falls in line with the experience that people have whenever they're a part of of the quote, unquote, Tech family. Yeah, one more question before I let you go, we'll kind of get into the formality of the Honors College. Are there any kind of maybe important deadlines or events or anything's coming up for the Honors College? College, and then, I guess, follow up question for somebody who might be listening and wondering if they're a good fit for the Honors College, what would you recommend as their course of action?

Ashton Thomas

So I would say, if you're interested in joining honors, apply as soon as possible. Our application is open through May 31 so you know, it's no rush. There's plenty of time. But if you think that you're interested, why wait? Right? Go ahead and either schedule a time to come meet with us. We've we've worked with admission. So anyone who ever comes on a tour, if they're interested in honors, they can stop by and they'll meet with myself, or they'll meet with Dr stake, and we'll kind of answer any questions that might come up throughout their tour, throughout their time trying to decide where to go. But as far as future events, we have our undergraduate research and service learning symposium. Yeah, that's March 14, so it's a really good way to showcase the projects that our undergraduates have been working on. It's open to all students, so we'll host it in University Hall, but abstracts can be submitted now. There's a link on our Instagram page at La tech honors. There you go. But yeah, that's the biggest event we have coming up in the next couple of

Gavin Kelly

months. Well, I know you're looking forward to that, and University Hall is a great building, so you kind of Honors College lucked out being able to call that, that building home. It's very pretty. It needed kind of a core, you know, program or college to be there. So I'm glad honors is getting to fill that role. I appreciate you making time for us today. Again. Thanks for being I know that I knew you'd be able to sort of talk about the Honors College at length, because, again, you are invested in it. So thankful for what you do, for the student experience in the Honors College, and hope that you get everything out of your future that you want, because it sounds like you have a good idea about that, and I think you'll be all right. So thanks again. And go dog. Yeah,

Ashton Thomas

thank you. Go Dogs.

Gavin Kelly

Thank you for listening to Beyond 1894. Please subscribe and rate us wherever you listen to podcasts. For more information about this episode, you can check out our show notes. Beyond 1894 is produced by Louisiana Tech University's Office of University Communications.