



**PENNONI
HONORS COLLEGE**

DREXEL UNIVERSITY



2026

IMPACT REPORT



A NOTE FROM THE DEAN

As Dean of the Pennoni Honors College, I am tremendously proud of the growing impact of our work and the achievements of our students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Guided by our strategic plan and its pillars of **integration, innovation, and enhancement**, we are expanding our reach throughout the University through innovations in teaching, experiential learning, and community-building. Together, our efforts enhance the Drexel experience, strengthening the University's reputation and placing the Pennoni Honors College at the forefront of higher education. Our 2026 Impact Report highlights these contributions, showcasing the achievements of our community and the measurable impact of our work across Drexel and beyond.

— Neville Vakharia, PhD

MISSION

Pennoni Honors College cultivates intellectual agency, motivated curiosity, and a conscientious community through collaboration and customization, serving all Drexel students, faculty, staff, alumni, and neighbors. Integrated across disciplines and campus life, Pennoni delivers innovative academic offerings, student-centered experiential learning, and a space for courageous conversations that welcomes students as their authentic selves, where they are advocated for, respected, and appreciated.



VISION

Pennoni Honors College will shape the future of higher education as a guiding light for interdisciplinary learning, institutional collaboration, and integrative experiences that emphasize student agency and enhance the Drexel experience.

VALUES

ACCESS AND
CUSTOMIZATION

COMMUNITY
AND
INCLUSION

CURIOSITY
AND PLAY

PILLARS

INTEGRATION



INNOVATION

ENHANCEMENT



Drexel was named a

GILMAN TOP PRODUCER

Over 100 Drexel students have studied or co-oped abroad with support from the Gilman Scholarship.

90 courses taught through the Honors Program and Center for Interdisciplinary Inquiry

\$26,843 given to student organizations for events and professional development

97.4% of Honors Program alumni are employed or in graduate school.

100% of recent custom-designed students report feeling prepared for life after college.

\$22,000 awarded in student research grants

STAR Scholars program yield rate:

2x

University average

Custom-designed major one-year retention rate:

100%
(13.6% higher than University average of 86.4%)

94% of Honors Program graduates said they would recommend the program to other students.

~15% of undergraduate students are supported by the Honors College.



INTEGRATION

Pennoni fosters a culture of reciprocity by strengthening collaborative relationships to leverage resources and build capacity throughout and beyond the University. This integrative approach ensures an interconnected, transparent, and enhanced experience for Drexel students, faculty, and staff in a way that continues to bolster the University's reputation.

NOTE ON ACADEMIC TRANSFORMATION

Two principles are guiding Drexel's approach to improving the student learning experience: flexible interdisciplinary curricula and experiential learning. Pennoni Honors College has long been at the forefront of both and continues to lead in these endeavors.

The Honors Program is positioning itself as a host and partner in expanding and piloting innovative courses, particularly those in alignment with Drexel's new core competencies. The Center for Interdisciplinary Inquiry promotes intentional interdisciplinarity through the Symposium and custom-designed major. The Symposium has become a template for successful co-teaching across disciplines, while the custom-designed major will have greater visibility as it assumes equal footing with double major, dual degree, and combined major programs for students to develop adaptive, individualized, and interdisciplinary curricula. The STAR Scholars program is an exemplar of undergraduate research and is at the center of conversations envisioning the future of experiential learning opportunities at Drexel. While the principles guiding Drexel's transformation are already threaded into Pennoni's fabric, we are using this moment as an opportunity to partner with thought leaders to inform our decision-making, strengthen our support network, and advocate for our students.



BUILDING KNOWLEDGE ACROSS THE UNIVERSITY

Relationships form at the Honors College. We create the conditions for students, faculty, and staff to build knowledge together. Faculty teach small, dynamic, and innovative classes that discourage top-down instruction and celebrate collaboration. Students' research agendas are supported by faculty and staff who volunteer as STAR and custom-designed capstone mentors. Fellowship panels are populated, in part, by faculty and staff who help applicants fine-tune their applications. We are proud of the work we do to connect students with our colleagues across the University, whom they otherwise might not have met.

2025 STAR SCHOLARS MENTORS OF THE YEAR



Wei-Heng Shih, PhD
Professor of Materials
Science & Engineering



Niharika Sravan, PhD
Assistant Professor of Physics

82

taught 91 courses at Pennoni

19

co-taught 10 classes for the Center for
Interdisciplinary Inquiry's Symposium

49

taught 58 Honors courses

285

participated as undergraduate research
mentors or on fellowship panels

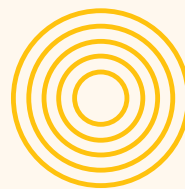
42

reviewed Honors Program
first-year applications

HONORS FACULTY OF THE YEAR

Christy Duré, MPA, MHA
Assistant Teaching
Professor of Health
Management & Policy





HONORS COURSES



Honors courses are often associated with “more:” more classes, more time, and more effort. Our focus, however, is on broadening and deepening learning. Courses move students beyond binary thinking to bridge theories and frameworks to approach the world more holistically. Faculty find innovative ways to teach with assistance from our staff, pedagogical support, and development funds to ensure there is joy in the classroom — that faculty are excited to try new things, and students are motivated to discover.

Students are also building skills that will serve them in the future: fostering imagination, navigating teamwork, and solving problems with creative solutions. Whether they’re designing products for possible future worlds, analyzing representations of resistance in film, taking in the philosophy of Dolly Parton, or building knowledge alongside incarcerated individuals, our students are taking multi- and interdisciplinary courses to approach problems with more comprehensive solutions.



62

Honors courses

6

independent studies

178

Honors option projects

61

faculty across the University teaching or supervising independent studies



MONSTERS

Paul Jerue and Chris Totoro are already frequent collaborators, having worked together on theatrical productions and as colleagues in Westphal since 2017. In the theatre, collaboration is essential to ensuring the show goes on. When they talked with Katie Barak, PhD, Director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Inquiry, about this year's Symposium theme, Monsters, they saw a great opportunity to build another cool new thing together.

Students in their course “Monster of the Week” were tasked with building monster puppets each week from trash, clay, cardboard — whatever materials were available. For the final exam, students roleplayed a kaiju battle in their handmade monster suits amid a scale-model set.

Most students were from STEM fields with little background in the arts. Jerue and Totoro, however, prioritized earnestness above experience and expertise. They encouraged students to fully dive in and let go of pressures related to success and grades by reiterating that they, too, were learning as they taught this course for the first time. The point was not to build the perfect monster; it was to explore creativity, problem-solving, and process.

By combining their expertise and viewing collaboration as an active practice, Jerue and Totoro demonstrated how a class can be interactive, thoughtful, and playful.



PENNONI FREQUENT FLYERS

Poppy Martínez Salas, BS fashion anthropology '26, Honors, and Bijaya Manandhar, BS applied neuroscience '26, Honors, are blazing trails. As custom-designed students, they built their own majors and wove undergraduate research and the Honors curriculum into their Drexel experience.

Bijaya began research as a STAR Scholar studying epigenetic therapies for Alzheimer's, later studying neurodevelopmental disorders with support from a UREP undergraduate research mini-grant, and analyzing mobile health apps for ADHD for her capstone project.



"The accumulation of new understandings each quarter has made a freshman who knew basic biology into a senior who knows how to evaluate and discuss the brain, the medical system, and coding techniques."

"The custom-designed major gave me a home to learn freely and without compromise."



Poppy's research in fashion began in the STAR Scholars program and continued through her capstone on women of color, dress, and identity in the workplace. She presented her work at national and international conferences, supported by travel grants from our Undergraduate Research & Enrichment Programs (UREP) office.



INNOVATION



Pennoni centers care in our work to reimagine existing practices, develop new programs, and cultivate a supportive space for innovation at Drexel. Through holistic approaches to curriculum development, advising, research, and mentorship, we are a dynamic model for an enhanced educational experience.



CONTINUED LEARNING

Throughout the year, we have gone to conferences and shared our successes with colleagues beyond the University. These experiences have also inspired us to continue innovating our work in the following ways.

Expanding the ways we prepare students for research and providing firmer foundations with learning objectives, assessment tools, and courses.

Developing ways to track and honor faculty research mentorship and undergraduate research participation across the University.

Cutting through the attention economy with an authentic voice and perspective in our communication channels.

Playing and encouraging play as an expansion and extension of experiential learning.

Investing in civic engagement, expanding this pillar from Honors with Distinction to all Honors education starting in Fall 2027.

Optimizing our online presence for AI search and human readability.

Creating better systems and processes to maximize efficiency in our workflows.



National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) Conference, College and Universities Public Relations Association of Pennsylvania (CUPRAP), Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR), Playposium, Administrative Professionals Conference (APC)

PLAYPOSIUM

We incorporated play into our strategic plan because we want students to rest and remember that learning is fun and college is also about personal growth. To explore how fun could meet the robust standards of an honors college, Directors Katie Barak, PhD, Melinda Lewis, PhD, and Julia Wisniewski, EdD, attended the second annual Playposium, organized by Professors at Play.

They found themselves at a former Girl Scout camp in the Colorado Rockies, bunking with fellow academics and not only learning theory but also practicing play: early morning hikes to a lake, archery practice in the afternoon, dance competitions, and games. By the end of the weekend, they had experienced the sort of community that only happens through shared play. The team came back to Drexel full of ideas and plans.

For the Honors College, play has become an expansion of experiential learning. Play provides opportunities to try new things, harness creativity, and build stronger teams. As the college moves forward in redesigning curricula, Barak and Wisniewski are working with partners to more firmly embed play ethos and practice to strengthen students' experiential learning. Their essay, "Pennoni Plays: Programming, Pedagogy, and Perfectionism," will be published in the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council's* Fall/Winter issue.



CUSTOM-DESIGNED GRADUATES

In her graduation speech, Director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Inquiry Katie Barak, PhD, recited Devan Barlow's Hugo Award-winning poem, "Your Visiting Dragon." The poem considers how to support dragons seeking comfort in winter as they migrate: warm laundry, animal protein, and soft blankets. Inevitably, dragons will leave, but one should always keep their home ready for their return. We stored our laundry on June 11 when our graduating custom-designed seniors walked across the Mandell Theater's stage. Our recent alumni represent the ingenuity, dexterity, and grit of pursuing an interdisciplinary education, trailblazing in the areas of fashion, climate change, sustainability, e-commerce, universal design, memory and meaning, and the gamification of health.

These students have pursued unique paths, not only building frameworks to support their own personal and professional goals, but also paving the way for others at Drexel to do the same. We are excited that the custom-designed major will have greater visibility with the academic transformation that will provide Dragons the opportunity to explore and curate their pathways.



Entrepreneurial engineering & design

Read about Lel's accessible cutting board

LELIA KARMELI



Multimedia production for events & public relations

Check out Carrie's book about memories & mementos

CARRIE MADDEN



Environmental communication & climate justice

Read Lakin's Philly guide to climate action

LAKIN CASEY



STAR AND BEYOND

The STAR Scholars program is a launchpad for students to pursue progressively higher-level research throughout their undergraduate careers. As the centralized office for undergraduate research at Drexel, Undergraduate Research & Enrichment Programs (UREP) supports the many trajectories these journeys can take.

As a 2023 STAR Scholar, Jordana Benblatt, BS psychology & health services administration '26, Honors, analyzed how gender affects the promotion to full professor process. After STAR, she continued working with her mentor Kristy Kelly, PhD, now at Columbia University, studying shadow education: students' use of supplemental materials and tutoring outside of the classroom. UREP awarded them a \$1,000 undergraduate research mini-grant to help support this project.

More recently, they turned their attention back to STAR. Their article, "Who gets to learn through research? Rethinking undergraduate research as inclusive pedagogy," published in *Teaching in Higher Education*, uses STAR as a case study to analyze how universities shape access to undergraduate research and how research is a key aspect of their teaching mission. Jordana is now pursuing an MPH in Community Health & Prevention at Drexel with a focus on maternal and child health.



Read
more
about this
project:





ENHANCEMENT

Pennoni cultivates a student-centered community that ensures a more connected, celebrated, and joyful experience for all who engage with Pennoni. In building this community, we enhance the Drexel experience and foster belonging for all students, faculty, and staff.

COMMUNITY AT PENNONI



One of the greatest joys of organizing community events is seeing students' faces light up — whether they're enjoying an ice cream social, making bouquets, attending a show, or simply spending time together.

These events provide students with opportunities for self-care, connection, and personal growth. Taking time to share these experiences broadens our understanding of the world and reminds us that we all have something valuable to contribute.



21 TICKET TUESDAY EVENTS

Honors students can enter a lottery for tickets to events and cultural activities in the area, including trips to Linvilla Orchards and New York City!

10 PENNONI PLAYGROUND EVENTS

Over the past year we have expanded events to include students from across the University to find joy, rest, and community.



STAR BEHIND THE SCENES

While the STAR Scholars program is an incredible opportunity for students to engage in research early in their academic careers, it also encourages them to build community with their fellow scholars, relationships with their mentors, and knowledge with their colleagues. We gave five students disposable cameras to capture their STAR summers, showing a holistic view of what it means to be a STAR Scholar.





CUSTOM-DESIGNED COMMUNITY

Each fall, we welcome graduates of the custom-designed major back to campus for our current student crit session and alumni after-party. This year, Katie Barak, PhD, Director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Inquiry, expounded on the complicated nature of being a “snowflake:” unique but misunderstood. Reframing this label, she asked, “What happens when you get few snowflakes together? A flurry? How about a community of snowflakes? Well that, my friends, is a blizzard...and that’s a force to be reckoned with.” Together, our “blizzard” made paper snowflakes to decorate our front gate, a physical reminder of how community can change perspectives and alter landscapes.



HONORS AND AWARDS

22

undergraduate research mini-grants of \$1,000 each awarded to faculty/student pairs for projects in winter and spring terms

125

students and alumni applied for fellowships

3

students and alumni received National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowships

21

fellowship recipients

13

fellowship alternates and honorable mentions

FOUR students and alumni were awarded 2026-27 Fulbright U.S. Student Program grants; three were selected as alternates.

MATTHEW SOESANTO

BS biological sciences '26, Fulbright Study/Research Grant to Indonesia



ALESSANDRA CABRERA

BS materials science & engineering '26 Fulbright English Teaching Assistant to Kazakhstan



DANIELLE WOLFSON

BS custom-designed major in museum studies '20, Honors Fulbright Study/Research Grant to Austria



MAVEN MERCADO

BS environmental science '26 Fulbright Study/Research Grant to Canada





HONORS AND AWARDS



KATE BUSKIRK

custom-designed major in interdisciplinary economic theory & analysis '28, Honors, was awarded a **Portz Interdisciplinary Fellowship** to study how economic precarity shows up in alternative musical subgenres.



DEJENAE SMITH

biological sciences '27, Honors, was named a **2026 Goldwater Scholar & Truman Scholarship finalist**.



MADELINE PLUMMER

BS public health '26, Honors, was first author on an article in *Psychology, Health & Medicine*. “Educational attainment, health locus of control and inflammation among cancer survivors in the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study” reports the findings of research she began as a STAR Scholar with Agus Surachman, PhD, Assistant Professor of Epidemiology, and continued with support from a UREP undergraduate research mini-grant.



KAI DORON, environmental science '28, was awarded a **DAAD Research Internship in Science and Engineering (RISE)** to study fossilized parasitic arthropods in Germany.

OUR STUDENT DESIGNER



Starting out at Pennoni Honors College, I was overwhelmed by the supportive culture and kindness of the whole team. Not only have my creative ambitions been cheered on, but in projects such as this impact report the process has been shaped by amazing collaboration.

I wanted this report to not only be a symbol of the success of Pennoni, but also embody the energy and growth of the college in this past year. It symbolizes everything that Pennoni does: support the individuality of students (in this case me as a designer) while also creating a community for people to grow and learn from each other.

— **Drew Malizia**
graphic design '27





DREXEL UNIVERSITY

Pennoni

Honors College