Meet the Dean: Terry Hunt

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They're experts in their fields and essential campus leaders. But how well do you know deans across the University?

This occasional Lo Que Pasa series introduces deans across campus and provides insight into their motivations, challenges and reasons for choosing to work at the UA.

This week, meet a dean whose research in the Pacific Islands was the subject of a 2012 National Geographic TV documentary.

Name: Terry Hunt [1]

College: Honors College

Dean since: September 2017

Why did you choose to join the UA?

The University of Arizona is a highly-ranked, world-class institution with particular strength in research. It is an honor to be part of this great university. It is also located in a beautiful place with rich history, and also rich in archaeology, a subject close to my heart. I visited Tucson several times growing up and I have always loved the desert and its climate. Finally, I am honored to join a university where anthropology is strong and has played an important role in the discipline's development.

What do you enjoy most about serving as dean of the Honors College?

What I most enjoy is working with high-achieving, high-potential students with majors and research projects from across the University. The students are so amazing, inspiring and humbling. Interacting with honors students is the most rewarding part of my role as dean.

What are some of the challenges of serving as dean?

Our students are everywhere on campus and building relationships with so many units is challenging. I wish we could work collaboratively all at once, but building bridges that are meaningful to our students takes time, commitment and patience.

What are some of the rewards?


Our rewards come with the success of our students. They win prestigious awards, do spectacular research, and we see their leadership unfold in so many ways.

What's one thing happening in your college right now that people should know about?

We are working to transform many aspects of the Honors College and we look forward to taking some bold steps to achieve our goals. And our goals revolve around the best possible honors education and engagement for our students. We are taking UA Honors to the top tier in the nation.

What does the future hold for the Honors College?

In less than one year we move into the Honors Village. This will be the new home for just over a thousand Honors College students, administrative offices, classrooms, event spaces and dining. The Honors Village will finally give us a centralized home base and the means to better establish our honors community, while at the same time better integrating honors across our entire campus through partnerships, curricula and activities.

What is your leadership philosophy?

Teamwork. Student-centered priorities. Respect.

Unlike other colleges, which are organized around disciplines, the Honors College is organized around students who are exceptional but pursuing a broad range of majors. What else makes the Honors College unique?

Other than the breadth of disciplines represented among our students, our uniqueness comes with our strong commitment to creating a challenging, stimulating and engaging experience for undergraduates. We see student mentoring and personal connections as central to our mission.

The New York Times' Frank Bruni recently wrote about making the most of one's college years. In my experience, he described a critical part of honors: build strong relationships with faculty and engage in a significant long-term project. Undergraduate research toward the thesis comes to mind for both aspects. I tell students that honors education makes the very most of their valuable college years.

How do you envision the role of the Honors College in the Fourth Industrial Revolution?

Every day we meet highly motivated, energetic students thinking at the edges of disciplines, focusing more on problem-solving and teamwork than on the traditional boundaries of inquiry. Our students are disruptive leaders in a rapidly changing world.

You're one of the world's foremost experts on the Pacific Islands— in particular, Rapa Nui, the Chilean island probably known by most people as Easter Island. What sparked your interest in that part of the world, and what's the most significant thing you've learned about it after more than 40 years of researching it?
I spent a formative part of my childhood in Hawaii and made friends who came from traditional cultures in the South Pacific. From an early age, I wanted to learn more about the prehistory, diversity and complexity of Pacific Island societies.

I earned my undergraduate degree at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo and then headed off to New Zealand to do my Master of Arts degree, and did my doctorate at the University of Washington. With graduate school and beyond, I worked in Hawaii, New Zealand, Fiji, Samoa, New Guinea, and finally on Rapa Nui. I continued to fall in love with the islands and their intriguing histories as well as their natural beauty and rich cultures.

The most significant thing I've learned is how rewarding it is to discover you're wrong about something! But I suppose my "15 minutes of fame" came with revelations about Rapa Nui, including what had never been done? "walking" a multiton statue replica for National Geographic TV. Check out the TV documentary [4].

You've led students on study abroad courses to Rapa Nui. What do you learn about the island when you take students there as opposed to visiting with a team of experienced researchers?

What amazes me is that I learn something new every time I visit Rapa Nui. Our research has focused on many diverse questions about the enigmas of a small, isolated island with extraordinary investment in monuments and statues and new discoveries continue.

My colleagues, students and I have rewritten so much about this fascinating island and we're just getting started. For me, Rapa Nui has been a lesson not only about the accomplishments and success of an island culture, but also a remarkable lesson for us in the value of critical thinking.

What's a fun fact most people don't know about you?

I love to cook and explore entirely new cuisines. I'm learning, exploring and trying Southwestern cooking.

Now that you've been a Tucsonan for about a year, what do you like most about Southern Arizona?

I love the desert landscape with its diversity of plants and animals. It is amazing how much life there is in the desert despite the long periods of dryness and great heat.

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[1] https://www.honors.arizona.edu/person/terry-l-hunt
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