# Ted Humphrey, founding dean of ASU's Barrett, The Honors College, dies at 85

## Longtime ASU professor transformed a small honors program into a nationally recognized college that helped shape honors education at universities across the country

By Tiffany Woodruff-Mayer, ASU News
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When Ted Humphrey first visited Arizona State University for a faculty interview in 1966, College Avenue was a chaotic construction zone. Crossing the street between appointments left his new black suit covered in dust. He later joked that he looked like Pigpen from the "Peanuts" comic strip.

Humphrey saw promise in the developing campus. He would go on to help realize that promise, first as a professor and chair of ASU's Department of Philosophy, then by reimagining what honors education could look like at a major public university.

Humphrey, the founding dean of Barrett, The Honors College and emeritus professor of philosophy at ASU, died Oct. 7 in Bermuda Dunes, California. He was 85.

He spent nearly five decades at the university, including 15 years leading the honors college he helped create.

His vision was shaped in part by his own experience as a first-generation college student. Raised in Lone Pine, California, Humphrey attended the University of California, Berkeley, on a scholarship. Overwhelmed by the size of the university, he transferred to the smaller University of California, Riverside, where he found the academic community he needed to thrive.

Years later, Humphrey recognized similar challenges among students at ASU. He believed a major research university could offer the academic rigor and personal attention of a small college without sacrificing its breadth of opportunities.

## Building an honors college

In 1983, Humphrey assumed leadership of ASU's honors program and began laying the groundwork for a college with its own academic identity, curriculum and residential community.

Five years later, the Arizona Board of Regents established the University Honors College at ASU, the nation's first four-year undergraduate residential honors college, with Humphrey as its founding dean.

"Ted was first a serious scholar but he was also a visionary," said Kristen Hermann, Barrett's current vice dean, who served on his leadership team during the college's early years. Hermann said he believed ASU could realize its potential "by creating an expanding community of young scholars."

Working alongside Humphrey, Hermann witnessed his efforts to develop national scholarship advising, recognize the value of honors faculty within the college and find new ways to recruit students from across the country.

Humphrey helped create a distinctive academic experience emphasizing critical thinking, interdisciplinary learning and close faculty mentorship. Central to that experience was The Human Event, a yearlong seminar course he helped shape that remains a signature component of Barrett's curriculum.

His influence extended beyond ASU. Humphrey served as president of the National Collegiate Honors Council, helping advance honors education nationally.

A defining milestone came in 2000, when Craig and Barbara Barrett made a $10 million gift to endow the honors college, then the largest personal gift in ASU history. The college was renamed for the Barretts the following year.

"Ted's vision became Barrett, The Honors College," Hermann said.

Today, Barrett serves more than 8,200 students across ASU's four metropolitan Phoenix campuses and online, offering a distinctive honors experience to students in any major.

## A professor at heart

Despite his accomplishments as an administrator, Humphrey's passion remained in the classroom.

"Ted was a force!" said Jane Maienschein, a University Professor in ASU's School of Life Sciences. Humphrey hired Maienschein into the philosophy department in 1981, and she later worked closely with him as the first chair of the faculty honors advisory council.

Even during his years as dean, Humphrey continued to engage students in discussions of philosophy and other challenging subjects.

"Most did not start with enthusiasm for philosophy, but they so admired his energy that he sucked them into caring about the readings they were discussing," Maienschein said.

After stepping down as dean in 2003, Humphrey returned to teaching and research as Barrett Professor and Lincoln Professor of Ethics. In a 2007 ASU News profile, he described limiting his own speaking time to just 10 minutes during a 75-minute class, allowing students to lead discussions and challenge ideas.

That same year, he was named an ASU President's Professor in recognition of his outstanding contributions to undergraduate education.

In 2014, Humphrey established the Ted Humphrey Scholarship Endowment to support future generations of students. He retired from ASU in May 2015.

Reflecting on his career in a 2014 ASU News interview, Humphrey expressed a simple hope:

"I hope that through my work with students, I have inspired them to have great and productive lives."

Nearly four decades after Barrett's founding, his influence continues through the students and academic community he helped bring together.

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*This story originally appeared on ASU News.*

## Main image



Ted Humphrey, founding dean of Barrett, The Honors College, is remembered for helping build one of the nation’s leading honors colleges. Courtesy photo

## Gallery



Three generations of Barrett, The Honors College leadership gathered at a Deans Club event in June 2023. From left: Current Dean Tara Williams (2022–present), founding Dean Ted Humphrey (1988–2003) and former Dean Mark Jacobs (2003–2022).



The Ted Humphrey Library, once used by Barrett's founding dean, remains a space for students and staff, with photos and memorabilia from his tenure on display.



Framed photographs and memorabilia displayed in the Ted Humphrey Library commemorate moments from the founding dean’s years at ASU and his contributions to Barrett, The Honors College.