

HGTC Honors Program Faculty Guide

Guidelines and Support for Faculty Teaching Honors

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I. Honors Program Information

<https://www.hgtc.edu/academics/honors-program/index.html>

II. Honors Course Design

Honors courses have a slightly modified approach to education. Honors classes are typically smaller and more specialized classes that emphasize critical thinking and contextual learning. They are designed to be more discussion intensive than a regular classroom format. They also include an Honors project(s) that varies depending on the course.

These courses typically consist of 15-20% “more work” than a traditional section. When designing an Honors course, it is important to remember that Honors courses are not meant to have more work for the sake of more work or harder work for the sake of harder work. ***The amount of work and its difficulty should serve a legitimate pedagogical purpose.***

Honors Course Requirements

- An Honors course should include the same learning outcomes as any traditional section of the course.
- In addition to being a more rigorous course, additional topics and greater depth may be considered.
- Honors classes should include a project(s)/assignment(s) to distinguish the course from traditional sections.
- In the Instructor Information Sheet under “Rationale for the Course,” a comment about how the specific course relates to the Honors curriculum should be included. Example: “This course can be used to satisfy the Honors Program mathematics requirement.”

At HGTC, we offer Honors Courses to student in two different ways.

Honors Course by Section

When there are enough students seeking the same honors level course at the same time, we can offer an entire section of the course. At the present time, we do not have sections of Honors courses.

Honors Course by Contract

When there are not enough students seeking the same honors level course at the same time, we offer a contract course. In this model, the professor and student develop a contract of expectations to receive honors credit for the course. The Honors Contract would be completed by the professor and signed by the student at the beginning of the course. Evidence of contract completion would be provided near the end of the course.

Every instructor and every course are different, but the National Collegiate honors Council provides guidance for developing course objectives. The information below is from the NCHC and is included to provide some guidelines you may find helpful for creating the expectations for your Honors course. The NCHC indicates that most honors courses should incorporate the following five objectives in some capacity.

NCHC Honors Course Objectives:

- 1. To help students develop effective written communication skills (including the ability to make effective use of the information and ideas they learn);**
- 2. To help students develop effective oral communication skills (while recognizing that not all students are comfortable talking a lot in class);**
- 3. To help students develop their ability to analyze and synthesize a broad range of material;**
- 4. To help students understand how scholars think about problems, formulate hypotheses, research those problems, and draw conclusions about them;**

and to help students understand how creative artists approach the creative process and produce an original work;

- 5. To help students become more independent and critical thinkers, demonstrating the ability to use knowledge and logic when discussing an issue or an idea, while considering the consequences of their ideas, for themselves, for others, and for society.**

NCHC Objective Descriptions:

#1 Developing written communication skills

Discussion and writing are the hallmarks of Honors classes. Students become better writers (Objective 1) by using writing, both in class and out, as a means to express their ideas. Therefore, Honors courses should emphasize papers and essays, not multiple-choice exams, and emphasize ideas and active learning over information and lectures.

How Honors faculty choose to help students develop written communication skills will depend on the discipline and on the instructor's individual views about teaching and learning. Instructors can help students develop written skills through traditional writing assignments or through other methods such as journals, creative writing, reports, critiques, reviews, in-class writing, or the use of writing as a preliminary to discussion of issues. (In fact, the latter works extremely well to stimulate discussion. Students who have written something ahead of time are more willing to share their ideas and are less likely to talk off the top their heads in class.)

#2 Developing oral communication skills

Students become better speakers (Objective 2) by participating in class discussion and, where appropriate, by leading class discussion. Therefore, Honors program courses should be discussion-oriented rather than lectures. Students benefit most from discussion when they are given the topic several days in advance and are asked to prepare their responses in writing ahead of time. The instructor might wish to provide some background to inform the discussion, which can then be used as a springboard to other ideas.

#3 and #4 Developing the ability to analyze, to synthesize, and to understand scholarly work

Students develop the ability to think about a broad range of ideas (Objective 3) and come to understand how scholars and artists work (Objective 4) by reading and responding to primary source material, by exploring issues and problems in depth rather than quickly and superficially, and by being carefully exposed to and guided through the methods of many disciplines. Therefore, Honors courses should try to explore with students the questions and methods common to all intellectual endeavors and those that differentiate the disciplines, to give students real-world, hands-on problems to explore, and to help them understand the place of intellectual pursuit in the greater society.

The use of primary sources allows students to develop their own interpretations instead of relying on someone else's. Cross-disciplinary readings are especially valuable, in that they give students the opportunity to synthesize ideas. But primary sources are not necessarily limited to published texts or original documents. They can, for example, be the students' own experiences, the results of surveys or questionnaires, works of art or music, films, videos, and the like. What is important is that students have an opportunity to be engaged by primary material. Students need to learn to see the broad implications of each issue, as well as learning to analyze and synthesize the material. In this way, students will be able to apply what they have learned to other situations.

#5 Helping students become independent and critical thinkers

Students become independent thinkers and critical thinkers (Objective 5) by working independently, yet under the guidance of responsive teachers. Therefore, an Honors course should give students a great deal of opportunity to think, write, and produce on their own (and in collaboration with their classmates) - as with papers and projects - and should give their work on-going feedback and encouragement. Honors courses should help students learn how to utilize their ideas in a broader social context - by helping them understand the origins, consequences, and principles underlying their ideas.

III. Best Practices in Honors Teaching

"Be willing to share the responsibility for teaching and learning with their students. The key to a successful Honors program is not the intelligence of the student or the subject matter of the course, but the attitude and approach of the instructor." – Anonymous Honors Instructor

- Honors courses should also create a classroom environment that is open to many perspectives and points of view, where students are encouraged to take intellectual risks and feel safe doing so, where they learn to respect each other (although not necessarily each other's ideas), and where they are taught to consider both the immediate and long-term consequences of their own ideas.
- Honors instructors themselves should be willing to teach in a different manner, to be open to challenges from students, to be willing to let the classroom discussion roam freely yet fruitfully.
- Honors students may be more intellectually skeptical and (usually) highly motivated than their peers, but they are not necessarily better organized, better informed, or better prepared for their classes. Just like other students, they need to learn good work habits. Still, it would be unfair to hold them to a higher standard in this regard.

It was emphasized that the HGTC Honors program be significantly "student driven." Many institutions conduct their honors classes in a manner similarly to what one finds in a graduate seminar with a focus on experiential learning.

Experiential Learning

"For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them"
- Aristotle

- **Curricula typically emphasize exploration and/or discovery rather than acquisition of specific knowledge sets; a focus on hands-on, usually supervised, practical engagement with usable outcomes can also occur.**

- **Programs focus on student-driven learning projects facilitated by faculty who provide no necessary, single conclusion to be drawn by all or many students. Programs often include international experience and active learning.**

There are many other ways in which Honors classes can be designed and taught. Below are some of the common Modes of Learning recommended by the NCHC:

The “Definition of Honors Education” deliberately general in order to encompass a wide range of successful honors programs and colleges without trying to establish one model of honors as more valid than another; it is, in short, an overarching concept of the varieties of honors experience.

The “Modes of Learning” section makes no attempt to catalog the way that honors is constructed at various institutions or to say that any particular element of a program or set of characteristics is fundamental, nor does it attempt to encompass all valuable components of an honors program or college.

The additional modes given below are neither ranked nor mutually exclusive; it would be unusual to find a model that included only one of them. Associated with the modes are definable skill sets that are regarded as especially valuable in honors learning. Honors courses foster student development or transformation in some or all of the following measurable outcomes: problem-solving, often with creative approaches; critical reading; clear, persuasive writing; oral presentation; critical thinking; forming judgments based on evidence; artistic literacy; articulated metacognition; and spiritual growth. The modes of learning described below include various special approaches. Not all approaches are included; in some programs, for example, accelerated forms of learning are closely associated with honors, usually entailing either advanced placement in tiered or stepped curricula or intensive work to cover more of the curriculum faster. Also, some of the categories overlap: undergraduate research, for instance, is the focus of “Research and Creative Scholarship” and “Breadth / Enduring Questions.”

Service Learning and Leadership

- The major emphasis is community engagement: often a single project or a series of collaborative projects that address real-world problems and through which students acquire practical experience and skills that lead to engaged citizenship. Some opportunities are offered for credit, some not.

- Curricula are frequently decentralized or selected from a menu of departmental honors courses. Students may also earn credit for philanthropic or humanitarian service off-campus. This structure may operate at some smaller institutions that emphasize the humanities and social sciences.
- The process often involves continuous reflective writing and oral presentation as the students articulate their discoveries and document their personal growth; this process may apply to all other modes described here.

Learning Communities

- Curricula emphasize an identified cohort of students living and/or working in close quarters and heavily engaged in campus centered activity with a strong integration of academic, social, and/or service activities.
- Programs foster a culture of thinking, growing, and inquiring within the living environment.
- Outcomes include connecting members to one another for the pursuit of common goals through interdependence and mutual obligation; respectful inclusiveness of economic, religious, cultural, ethnic, social, and other differences; and common inquiry in which members collaborate on solutions to common problems.

Research and Creative Scholarship (“learning in depth”)

- Curricula are characterized by highly focused, often discipline-oriented learning experiences: an emphasis on research writing in the humanities and social sciences, including data analysis in the social sciences, and on experimentation, measurement, data analysis, and interpretation in the natural sciences.
- The products are often documented scholarship that leads to new integrations, new knowledge, or new understandings of creative products.

Breadth and Enduring Questions (“multi- or interdisciplinary learning”)

- Curricula are characterized largely by core-curriculum honors courses, often with seminars that provide greater depth.
- Programs confront students with alternative modes of inquiry, exploration, discovery, tolerance of ambiguity, and enduring questions. Coursework often

requires integrative learning: both local and global learning with connections across time, genre, and disciplines, not always in classroom situations.

- The products often involve creative integrations of evidence from several disciplines with an aggressive emphasis on interdisciplinary. Assessment of the products emphasizes process rather than product, focusing on metacognitive questions such as “how do you know?” Students are encouraged to dig deep without a prescribed result.

References

L. Clark and C. Fuiks (2002) *Teaching and Learning in Honors*. NCHC Monograph Series

T. James (2006) *A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges*. NCHC Monograph Series

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