

CHAPTER FOUR

CORE OF THE PROGRAM

While the case has already been made in previous pages that the honors director has the most important role, it cannot be denied that an honors program needs some dynamic academic offerings. It needs classes that challenge the student in positive ways and prepare that student for even greater challenges at the four-year institution. Both the new honors program and established programs must make careful academic decisions.

The Curriculum

While the director, the honors committee, the institution or some combination of these elements will make decisions about what will comprise the core of the program, honors programs often contain a sequence or selection of courses and opportunities for leadership experiences and scholarly accomplishments.

Honors academic offerings vary from one institution to another, but here are some typical models:

- Honors sections of university parallel courses;
- Honors interdisciplinary courses;
- Team-taught or paired classes;
- Honors contracts in regular classes;
- Independent study classes;
- Internships;
- Honors Semesters at offsite locations.

Honors Sections

Special honors sections of university parallel courses are usually restricted to 10-20 students. The seminar-style instruction encourages student involvement. Although the course objectives are primarily the same as in the non-honors sections, the classes emphasize individual interpretation and analysis, creative thinking, oral communication, and writing. Often the texts differ from those in regular sections and emphasize use of original documents and recent journals. The level of discussion is usually more intellectual and probing, and the student outcomes for the course may emphasize an improvement of critical-thinking skills.

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For example, some states have a common course numbering system. An honors section can be created for any one of those numbers should schools find it appropriate for their program. Freshman English or Freshman Composition is a common enough course, and a course description will most likely be on file with the state if it has common course numbering. An honors section of this course can keep this number and satisfy the Freshman English requirement if it fulfills the objectives of this shared course description. The methods used to accomplish these objectives are rarely prescribed. If a course must cover some of the modes of academic writing and the processes of producing a research paper, it can indeed perform these tasks in such a way as to create an exciting honors section that fulfills all requirements of Freshman English.

One important note must be added: each honors program will define what "honors" means, but there is considerable agreement among honors professionals that an honors section is not formed by adding more work to the regular course. The honors section of the course should embody the mission and objectives of the program, but that does not mean two extra novels in a literature course or an extra paper in a history course. When faculty members want to develop honors sections, the honors director takes responsibility to train them in the missions and objectives of the program. The National Collegiate Honors Council reinforces this definition of honors sections by including many panels on this subject at each annual convention.

Interdisciplinary Courses

Some honors programs offer an introductory interdisciplinary class. A few offer the entire honors curriculum through interdisciplinary classes. Many honors programs require an interdisciplinary class as a capstone class. As in other honors courses, the enrollment in interdisciplinary classes is usually held to 10-20 students.

An initial class often includes strategies for note-taking, studying, test taking, and research as well as a full discussion of the honors experience and honors student issues. The interdisciplinary nature of this type of class can come from choosing a reader that involves issues from different disciplines, from approaching one issue from a number of different directions, from exploring students' career ambitions and how different disciplines can lead to successful lives, or from inviting faculty from different disciplines to meet with the class on a rotating basis.

Honors programs that use an interdisciplinary approach throughout the curriculum may have a separate honors faculty. In this way, the

honors director can negotiate issues of credit workload and overload without trampling upon any other department's planning and curriculum implementation. Finding a way to encourage non-honors faculty to cooperate with an interdisciplinary course, however, is often productive, and their involvement can add new ideas and approaches to the honors experience as well as carry honors practices back to the regular classroom.

The capstone class may focus on a particular issue or problem and approach it from the perspectives of various disciplines. Many of the capstone classes focus on the future, with a central goal being to prepare the students for the careers and academic challenges they will face. Many interdisciplinary classes use team teaching, guest lectures, field trips, and class projects. Often, students will produce a portfolio or final project that indicates their readiness to leave the two-year honors level.

Team-Taught or Paired Classes

A cross between the honors section and the interdisciplinary class is a pair of honor classes scheduled consecutively that students take as a unit. Classes in the same period of history, literature, or art may be taken as a pair. The professors can coordinate the study topics, outside field trips, guest speakers, and writing assignments. The professors may team-teach or coordinate their syllabi and assignments. While encouraging students to make connections across disciplines and classes, these pairs also promote community among the students in the honors program.

An example of this type of experience could entail scheduling speech and political science classes back to back. Students may be asked to write papers dealing with current political events in the political sciences course; the concentration in their speech class will be on speeches about current political issues. A third class, such as English composition, may be connected by a single theme or by emphasizing argumentative discourse, which would be featured in all of the classes. In any case, the instructors will cooperate to ensure that the students are making connections; they may find that attending the other instructor's classes will help them to maintain the interdisciplinary nature of the courses. The students' final projects or portfolios may be presented in each of the classes or contain material from each of the classes. The possibilities for interconnecting courses will only be limited by the imagination and efforts of the faculty and administration involved.

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Honors Contracts

An honors contract allows an honors student to earn honors credit in a non-honors class. Contract students should sign an agreement with their professors that they will complete a specified project. Usually the students are required to earn an A or B grade and submit an acceptable project to qualify for honors credit. The honors contract can be used to supplement the honors class offerings. In disciplines that do not offer honors sections—or when there are too few students for a class to make—the honors contract can accommodate the individual student who needs or desires honors credit. Usually the honors project must be submitted to and approved by the honors director and/or honors committee before honors credit is granted. Honors directors, in addition to the faculty member involved, should sign these formal contracts, and department chairs should either sign the contracts or receive a copy of the contract. Frequently, the projects are housed in the honors library for student use.

An alternative way to think about honors contracts exists at some institutions already: the honors lab. Many science and oral communications courses require a relevant lab. If there are too few students to justify the creation of a separate honors section of the course, students wishing to receive honors credit may be able to register for a separate lab. Often, instructor's remuneration for teaching labs is figured differently from their lecture section pay, and while some instructors will not be willing to teach another section of the lab, the honors program may find that department chairs and deans will not oppose the lab on economic grounds. Students in these courses will share the lecture with all of the students earning credit in that course, but the lab experience will be designed to follow the precepts and philosophy of the honors program at the institution.

Students may already be performing tasks that make them eligible for honors credit. Talented students may be so advanced in chemistry courses that they become assistants for the instructor. Perhaps they perform the labs before the regular students do just to see if the chemicals are working; they may maintain equipment or explain some of the concepts to the other students. If they had signed an honors contract before the class started, they would have earned honors credit. Caution should be taken that students are not just asked to read extra books or write an extra paper. Such assignments promote the unfortunate impression that honors courses are about more work, not a different experience. Any effort to trivialize the honors experience or make the classroom experience less than exciting and interactive will threaten

the longevity or quality of the program. Furthermore, each honors program will have to decide what to do if the student signs the contract and does not fulfill the terms successfully, including whether or not the student has the option to cancel or void the contract entirely or must suffer clearly demarcated penalties.

Independent Study

Honors credit can also be earned through independent study. Some colleges reimburse the professor who supervises such an honors project. If such a project is permitted, it is usually not until the sophomore year. This project, like honors contracts, may need the approval of the honors director and/or the department chair or dean before honors credit is granted.

Many honors programs use this option, if they use it at all, to help students finish a final project or portfolio. If the honors program has a commitment to making the learning experience interactive and community based, then this option will probably not be appropriate for only one student at a time; a professor may have to take on several vocal, active, and participatory students to make this work qualify as an honors experience. If the honors program has a different emphasis, one that each student can complete individually, then an independent study would serve quite well.

Internships

Some honors programs provide experiential learning through service learning, a mentor program, or internships. Students are placed in offices under the mentorship of professionals in their chosen fields. In addition to their on-the-job training, they usually submit a written assignment relevant to the experience.

At the two-year level, students often find that they are not comfortable committing themselves entirely to one field or future profession. Honors directors often have to find professional experiences that help the students to grow in general terms rather than pursue a specific field. For instance, students may need leadership mentors; they could shadow, for example, the president of a local business for a period of time. Although students may never go into that business, they may learn many valuable lessons from that professional. Besides leadership, internships in communications, quality control, managerial skills, and volunteer work are not uncommon. Some mentoring experiences or internships are designed to help students narrow their preferences for a career path. This exciting opportunity is often what many honors students need to mature and develop adult ambitions. Service learning

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may be something that every honors course includes, depending on the honors program, but it may also provide the necessary components to create the honors experience for a few students or for students registered in regular classes.

While the people working in the honors program, the director and committee, the faculty, and the students, are really the heart and soul of an honors program, no academic program prospers without clearly defined and well-thought-out courses. Each institution will design a program's courses to fit not only its own students but its own institutional culture and history. With so many options for mixing and matching types of honors courses, each curriculum will have something special to offer.

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