

How Honors Courses are Different

- Based on information from The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC)

Honors education is characterized by in-class and extracurricular activities that are measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education. Honors experiences include a distinctive learner-directed environment and philosophy, provide opportunities that are appropriately tailored to fit the institution's culture and mission, and frequently occur within a close community of students and faculty. In most cases, the honors community is composed of carefully selected teachers and students who form a cross- or multi-disciplinary cohort dedicated to achieving exceptional learning and personal standards.

1. *Reversed Classrooms.* A reversed classroom frees students from the typical lecture-based format. That means instead of having someone talk at you about course material, you get to discuss big ideas and important questions together. "Honors students spend valuable class time wrestling with difficult questions."

This style of learning works because students read their assignments before class, so they can spend valuable class time wrestling with difficult questions, debating important points, and working through activities or simulations. This is called a flipped classroom model. It happens to be one of the 8 core elements of an American Honors class, but it's common in many other honors programs, too.

2. *Sophisticated Materials.* A giant wall of notes on the screen? No fun. A great classroom discussion can be facilitated by great teaching materials. Ever had a professor display a giant wall of notes on the screen and then simply read them out loud? No fun, right? That's where better teaching materials can come into play.

Here's an example: when designing a recent history class, an American Honors professor adapted non-ADA compliant powerpoint slides to online "magazine" style pages that included relevant images and links to external resources for enhanced content.

Students could actually explore the info on their own.

3. *Experiential/Hands-on Learning.* Not everybody learns best just by talking through ideas, or even reading them. Sometimes you have to get your hands dirty and really experience something to understand it. "Sometimes you have to experience something to understand it." Here is a super fun example from an American Honors political science course this semester. Students enact a foreign policy simulation by role-playing as leaders of different countries. The simulation takes place over the course of several weeks while the professor writes fictional news updates based on current events. Students get to discuss the news and make decisions based on how they (and their country) would react.

Hands-on learning can be a lot of fun, but it's also a way to geek out—which just might be what college is all about in the first place.

4. *Depth Over Quantity* An honors education is about depth. Ever felt like you were assigned homework just for the sake of giving you something to do? Fortunately, that doesn't happen in honors classes. That's because an honors education is about depth. We're not interested in assigning busywork to students. Instead, Honors classes help students attend to their learning in deeper ways—be it by using different critical perspectives and theoretical lenses or through hands-on assignments that access multiple intelligences.

Objectives

Most Honors courses will have the following five objectives, or some variation:

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.

Let us consider each of these briefly.

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.)

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.

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.

Exploring issues and problems in depth may mean that the course covers less material than conventional courses. In many courses, the amount of material covered is less important than the way the material is handled. 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.

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 ongoing 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.

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 others' ideas), and where they are taught to consider both the immediate and long term consequences of their own ideas.

When students become active learners through direct involvement with an issue, they develop attitudes and habits that may make them more active in the intellectual and cultural life of the community. It also makes them more aware of the political and social realities of that community.

But for students to become truly active participants in their learning, they must become intellectual risk-takers. Therefore, Honors instructors themselves should be willing to take risks—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.

While Honors courses need to help students develop intellectually, instructors also need to hold them responsible for meeting the course requirements. Honors students may be brighter than the average student—more intellectually skeptical and (usually) highly motivated—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; most are, after all, 18 to 21 years old. Also, 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.