

What is an FSU Honors Course? A Guide for Faculty

Annette Schwabe, Ph.D., Director of FSU Honors Program, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies

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Purpose

The purpose of this guide is three-fold:

1. To provide shared learning experiences for our honors students that capitalize on their dispositions as high-achieving students and to meet their academic needs.
2. To provide honors instructors with a useful source of information that translates research on best practices in honors instruction into ideas for developing and teaching honors course sections. Faculty who teach honors sections across the university have asked me, “What makes an honors course distinct from other sections of my course” and “Do you have tips for designing an honors course?” This guide is intended to address those questions.
3. To get feedback from honors instructors based on your own “tried and true” methods. We value insights from honors instructors on teaching practices that you have found effective for facilitating student academic development and that inspire engagement and learning in their honors courses. Just as great teaching is an ongoing project, so too is this document a work in progress that evolves with insights from skilled faculty who create and teach honors courses.

Whether you are embarking on teaching your first honors course or are experienced honors instructors I hope you find this useful for helping honors students reach their highest aspirations in their undergraduate careers and success in their post-graduate pursuits.

This document provides a research-based guide for developing honors courses that capitalize on the dispositions of honors students and, thus, that meet the needs of honors students academically, socially, and personally. Honors students often have similar learning orientations including intensive curiosity, creativity, embracing ambiguity as a way to grow, flexibility, openness to novel perspectives, a strong work ethic, persistence, and engagement in a range of pursuits (Achterberg 2005, Rinn 2008, Rinn and Plucker 2019). Accordingly, a value-added honors curriculum and honors experiences exemplify *four basic principles and values*:

- active and applied learning
- an expanded concept of text (e.g., using primary sources including novels as text or the local community as text – see the National Collegiate Honors Council’s City as a model <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=nchcmono>).
- challenging thinking through complex and multidimensional issues or problems, and
- facilitating both autonomy (i.e., desire freedom to direct their learning – see Wolfensberger, below) and community (Daniels 2010).

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Characteristics of Honors Courses

“Honors education ignites passion for lifelong learning and encourages student creativity, collaboration, and leadership in the classroom and beyond. It 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 curricula serve as a laboratory for inventive and experiential education that can be implemented in the traditional classroom. 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” (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2012).

Contrary to popular perception, honors courses are not “just more work” than a non-honors version of that course. Nor are honors courses simply accelerated versions of non-honors courses. So how do they differ? The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) defines honors courses as “...measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education.” Breadth is achieved through integrative, interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches. Depth is fostered via deep ‘dives’ into a body of knowledge and methodology around a particular topic or field, typically using primary sources and scholarly articles in the place of textbooks. Higher-order, analytical, flexible thinking and the ability to transfer learning to novel situations are accelerated through complex and somewhat open-ended assignments in which students can experiment and innovate to deepen learning on an individual level. In short, honors courses differ qualitatively rather than quantitatively from non-honors courses.

Underlying Principles for Teaching Honors. Honors courses vary in format and are responsive to feedback from honors students, who, in collaboration with their faculty instructor, are given more autonomy and freedom to choose a learning path. Honors courses typically offer different ways of learning course concepts and methods, including through applied work in collaboration with others. Because collaboration provides opportunities for ongoing peer- and instructor-feedback, the course content might progress more slowly than is typical of larger non-honors courses and in other phases might be accelerated.

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Honors Course Design: Specific Teaching Approaches

Honors courses often incorporate the following goals and methods.

1. **Inquiry-based pedagogies.** Allows students to explore ideas, possible research questions, and address challenging issues or demands of a professional role (maximum flexibility to ask relevant questions of interest and developing the skills to derive relevant and meaningful answers)^[1] See Blessinger, Patrick, and John M. Carfora. 2015. *Inquiry-Based Learning for Multidisciplinary Programs : A Conceptual and Practical Resource for Educators*, Emerald Publishing.
2. **Student-directed learning.** Honors value-added courses are relatively open-ended, require significant student initiative and self-direction, and create conditions of ambiguity to provoke creativity, analysis, and effective problem-solving.
3. **Multidisciplinary peer collaboration** to help students develop the mindset and skills to collaborate effectively with others who often have different roles, expertise, and backgrounds to prepare for creative and productive engagement in professional settings.
4. **Offer freedom** to facilitate creativity, intellectual risk-taking, and independent, life-long learning through:
 - a. Flexibility (in units, pace, choices), allow for self-regulation and initiative, openness (tolerance of ambiguity – ambiguity drives development)
 - b. Creative and innovative teaching, experimentation, enjoyment and fun
 - c. Tasks that require self-direction, autonomy, informed decision-making
5. **Create community** through:
 - a. High levels of interaction, peer feedback, active learning
 - b. Encouragement, shared joy in learning, inspiration
 - c. Instructor availability, commitment to student success (learning climate, mentoring that supports all aspects of development.
6. **Enhance academic competence** through:
 - a. Multi- and interdisciplinary experiences and thinking, using multiple perspectives to bear on an issue or problem
 - b. Scholarly teaching (original sources, conceptual rather than rote), academic depth, engagement in inquiry, investigation, and research
 - c. Challenging and complex learning tasks, accelerated pace of learning
 - d. Meta-analysis using writing and speaking as essential methods of learning
 - e. Critical “meta” reflection, to help students learn how, when, and why to learn, particularly in a world in which the demand for new kinds of knowledge in novel contexts are changing at a rapid pace.

Substantively, honors course design capitalizes on the dispositions of honors students through some or all of the following:

- Intensive writing – multiple drafts with instructor and/or peer feedback over the semester.
- Synthesis of materials and ideas across disciplines.
- Projects that address real-world problems and lead to engaged citizenship.
- Posing questions that do not call for rote answers or issues that do not call for simple, “solutions” in order to facilitate intellectual risk-taking and deep learning.

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In summary, learning experiences in core honors courses share common pedagogical approaches including interdisciplinary thinking, inquiry-based methods, and applied, collaborative, and engaged learning in the classroom. Typically, honors instructors typically use original source materials instead of texts, which allows students to engage in complex and higher-order thinking, raise questions, and generate new ideas. Rather than simply being assigned a greater volume of work, honors courses are designed to enable broader, deeper, and inquiry-driven thinking and more complex engagement with material. Honors ideally requires students to shape or drive their learning with challenge and support from faculty.

Of course, many of the approaches here are also best practices for all university courses. As such, honors programs can serve as a teaching and learning incubator for the larger campus.

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Types of Honors Courses at FSU

Honors Signature Courses. These courses, which revolve around the theme “Inquiry and Practice Across the Disciplines” support the unique academic needs of honors students by sharing common teaching approaches including inquiry-based methods, interdisciplinary challenges, and applied, collaborative learning in the classroom. Through these approaches, each student in the course is involved as an active and engaged participant in the co-creation of knowledge with the instructor and other students. By creating an active learning environment, Honors Signature Courses stimulate critical and analytical thinking, and challenge students to develop new insights, knowledge, and ideas. By fostering creative thinking and individual knowledge-building Honors Signature courses help to prepare students for a wide variety of career paths, and nurture vital skills for today’s competitive academic and professional markets.

With no more than 24 students in a section, Honors Signature courses offer close interaction with honors instructors who are selected for their strong teaching and commitment to undergraduate student success. Honors Signature courses also typically meet multiple requirements needed by honors students. This curriculum is further supported by rich and varied co- and extracurricular experiences, designed to extend student learning beyond the classroom. By fostering creative thinking and individual knowledge building, Honors Signature courses help to prepare students for a wide variety of career paths and support the acquisition of vital skills for today’s competitive academic and professional markets.

Within the overarching theme of *Inquiry and Practice Across the Disciplines* Honors Signature courses are aligned with the following thematic clusters, which span disciplinary areas.

1. **Freedom and (In)Equality.**

Courses in this cluster explore the ways in which both social systems and individual freedom influence one’s everyday experiences and perspectives through the lens of both enduring and contemporary issues.

2. **Sustainability.**

FSU’s Sustainable Campus defines sustainability as *meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*. In keeping with the holistic approach toward developing standards for a sustainability curriculum suggested by Sustainable Campus, sustainability courses should incorporate at least two of the following *three pillars of sustainability*: the environment, economy, and society.

3. **Information and Scientific Literacy.**

Students develop foundational methods and tools for gathering and analyzing evidence systematically and objectively in order to answer relevant questions in the field and/or a topic of inquiry. Courses in this cluster provide students with the intellectual perspective and skills to vet, analyze, and interpret evidence. The “Information and Scientific Literacy” cluster helps students develop the ability to evaluate information effectively including vetting and evaluating the validity of claims.

4. **Innovation, Technology, and Culture.**

The “Innovation, Technology, and Culture” cluster helps students develop foundational knowledge and skills to be competent and flexible creators of information and new knowledge through a variety of modes of technology. Technology involves applying scientific knowledge to innovate in addressing practical issues across fields. Whereas the Information

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and Scientific Literacy” cluster teaches students how to evaluate and select methods of inquiry, the “Innovation, Technology, and Culture” cluster invites students to apply principles of inquiry to create and innovate.

We invite ideas for a future cluster, *Health and Healing: Social, Scientific, and Ethical Perspectives*.

Students must complete two Honors Signature Courses toward earning the honors medallion and graduating with University Honors. These courses are taught by core honors faculty as well as selected departmental faculty who serve as Honors Teaching Scholars. By the end of fall semester 2021, we intend to open a formal invitation by application to teach Honors Signature courses and will send an announcement in email including details on funding. Meanwhile, if you or a colleague are interested in developing and offering an Honors Signature course, please feel free to contact the Director of the Honors Program at: aschwabe@fsu.edu

Honors Sections of Courses in the Departmental Curriculum. These courses typically meet Liberal Studies and major/minor requirements or satisfy pre-requisites and are designed to capitalize on and foster the academic dispositions and skills common to honors students: creativity; a passion for learning; the drive and capacity to engage in critical and analytical thinking; and the ability to collaborate and communicate with others from different backgrounds.

Honors-Augmented Courses. Honors students can earn credits toward completing the University Honors Program requirements through honors-augmented courses, in which an honors section is offered on the same schedule and at the same location as a “regular” (non-honors) course. Honors-Augmented courses are arranged in advance by the Honors Program in tandem with faculty instructors. Every honors-augmented section is tailored to the academic needs of honors students and should have a syllabus that specifies the assignments and experiences unique to the section designed for honors students. Ideally, course instructors will meet with students enrolled in the honors section as a group at least twice per semester to provide feedback, engage in intellectual conversations around course topics, build a professional relationship with faculty, and support student accountability and follow-up as independent learners. In addition, such meetings will help students develop an honors identity and sense of belonging to an intellectual community.

Individual Honors-Augmented Courses. Students may also get credit toward their honors requirements by participating in Individual Honors-Augmented course contract with a course instructor. Individual Honors-Augmented courses allow a student to earn honors credit in a 2000-4000-level course that is not offered as an honors section in a given semester. The following link provides details about honors contracts <https://honors.fsu.edu/university-honors/course-contracts>

Honors Directed Individual Study. University Honors students may earn credit hours by registering to work with individual faculty. Much like an Individual Honors-Augmented Course, students choose topics of study in the Honors DIS and receive close mentoring by the faculty member to accomplish high-level independent work.

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Individual Honors-Augmented Course Contract

Individual Honors-Augmented course contracts involve careful planning between student and course instructor, collaboration throughout the semester as needed, and a commitment from both parties to complete necessary documentation so the student can receive credit. Typically, course instructors and students meet one-on-one at least three times during the semester in which the student is completing in an Individual Honors-Augmented course contract. Teaching honors students in courses with an individually honors-augmented course contract facilitates close faculty-student mentorship, a high-impact practice that supports student success and satisfaction.

Getting the Contract Approved and Submitted:

What Students Need to Do

1. Identify the 2000-4000 level non-honors course in your major or minor that you would like to use to earn honors credit
2. Meet with the course instructor and express your interest in an individual honors-augmented course contract
3. Discuss and determine honors requirements for the contract
4. Complete the individual honors-augmented course contract information and request course instructor approval via the individual honors-augmented course contract online portal by the deadline of 4pm on the third Friday of the semester
Note: The Honors Program must receive the course instructor's approval by the deadline. There are no exceptions.
5. Meet with the course instructor three times during the semester
6. Upon completion of the course and contracted honors requirements, meet with the course instructor to confirm honors credit
7. Request Recommendation of Honors Credit from the course instructor if honors requirements have been met

What Course Instructors Need to Do

1. Discuss and approve course contract requirements and expectations with the student
2. Review and complete the course instructor approval request sent by the student via the online portal
3. Assign a grade for the course based on the standard course requirements/criteria and independent of the contracted honors requirements
4. Once the honors requirements are completed, determine if the work fulfills the expectations for receiving honors credit. (See sample rubric on page 9)
5. Upon completion of the course meet with the student to confirm honors credit
6. Complete and submit the Recommendation of Honors Credit request within the online portal by 4:00pm on the day that grades are due for the semester.

Individual Honors-Augmented Course Guidelines

For a course to satisfy the requirements of the individual honors-augmented course contract guidelines, the course must be:

- graded (A-F) and students must receive a course grade of B- or higher in addition to completing their contract requirements to earn honors credit
- taught by a faculty member or Category 3+ graduate teaching student as defined by the FSU Faculty Handbook or Graduate Bulletin.
- required for the student's major or minor coursework

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The honors student must complete satisfactorily all the regular course requirements plus one of the following artifacts, designed to foster independent, complex, and flexible thinking:

- an extra research, writing, or creative project
- additional readings with an appropriate evaluative component
- any other reasonable assignment on which the student and course instructor agree

In addition to completing one of the above options, the student must also:

- meet with their course instructor at least three times during the semester to discuss progress on the honors requirements
- meet the deadlines of the individual honors-augmented course contract process including the initial contract application and the final Recommendation for Honors Credit form.

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Honors Directed Individual Study (DIS) Course Contract

The Honors DIS requires students to complete a project that meets the following five standards:

- Demonstrates intellectual initiative on the part of the student.
- Demonstrates engagement with the scholarship in the subject of the DIS, whether the work of the DIS is research or creative activity.
- Use letter grades (A-F). Students must receive a course **grade of B-** or higher in addition to completing their contract requirements to earn honors credit.
- Be directed by a faculty member or Category 3+ graduate teaching student as defined by the [FSU Faculty Handbook](#) or [Graduate Bulletin](#).
- Involve at least twenty (20) hours of work for each credit hour awarded.

What Students Need to Do

1. Identify the DIS course that you would like to use to earn honors credit.
2. Register for a graded DIS in the appropriate department no later than the fourth day of the semester in which the DIS will begin.
Note: The DIS must be created using the department's course number for a DIS and not honors thesis credit. *For questions regarding registering for a DIS, please contact your major advisor.*
3. Meet with the course instructor and express your interest in earning honors credit for your DIS course.
4. Discuss and determine honors requirements for the course with the course instructor.
5. Complete the Honors DIS course contract information and request course instructor approval via the Honors DIS course contract online portal by the deadline of 4pm on the fourth day of the semester.
Note: The course instructor's approval must also be received by the deadline. There are no exceptions.
6. Upon completion of the course and contracted honors requirements, meet with the course instructor to confirm honors credit.
7. Request Recommendation of Honors Credit from the course instructor if honors requirements have been met

What Course Instructors Need to Do

1. Discuss and approve honors requirements for the course with the student.
2. Review and complete the course instructor approval request completed by the student.
3. Assign a grade for the course based on the standard course requirements/criteria and independent of the contracted honors requirements.
4. Once the honors requirements are completed, determine if the work fulfills the expectations for receiving honors credit. (See sample rubric below)
5. Upon completion of the course meet with the student to confirm honors credit.
6. Complete and submit the Recommendation of Honors Credit request within the online portal by 4:00pm on the day that grades are due for the semester.

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Sample Course Contract Process Rubric

	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
<p>Professional Communication (Email and In-person) The student practices and maintains professional standards in communication with the instructor.</p>		
<p>Application Deadline The student meets the Honors Program application deadline and any additional deadlines established with the instructor.</p>		
<p>Faculty Meeting 1 The student coordinates and participates in the first check-in meeting with the instructor.</p>		
<p>Faculty Meeting 2 The student coordinates and participates in the second check-in meeting with the instructor.</p>		
<p>Faculty Meeting 3 The student coordinates and participates in the third check-in meeting with the instructor.</p>		
<p>Completion of Contract Requirements The student successfully completes the requirements of individual honors-augmented contract based on faculty determination that student met honors-specific criteria.</p>		
<p>Recommendation for Honors Credit Deadline The student meets the Honors Program contract deadline of 4pm on the Tuesday that grades are due for the semester and any additional deadlines established with the instructor.</p>		

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We appreciate your willingness to offer honors students an enriched and unique learning experience that also allows them to earn credits toward completing the University Honors program. We hope that your participation in this process is rewarding for both you and the student.

For more detail on honors courses <https://honors.fsu.edu/university-honors/course-information>. For questions regarding individual honors-augmented course contracts, please contact the Honors Program at honors@fsu.edu. For questions or suggestions regarding the approach to honors-specific course development or about the suggestions for development of an augmented course, please contact Annette Schwabe at aschwabe@fsu.edu.

Best,
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^[1]Inquiry-based learning is designed to stimulate curiosity and deeper learning and to help students develop methods of analysis to answer questions relevant to the field. Inquiry-based teaching methods invite students to participate actively in learning, from posing questions to using reasoning and analysis to answer them. In brief, inquiry-based methods help students learn how to think and apply knowledge instead of simply learning a list of facts or rote principles.