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## Building Honors Contracts: Insights and Oversights

Kristine A. Miller

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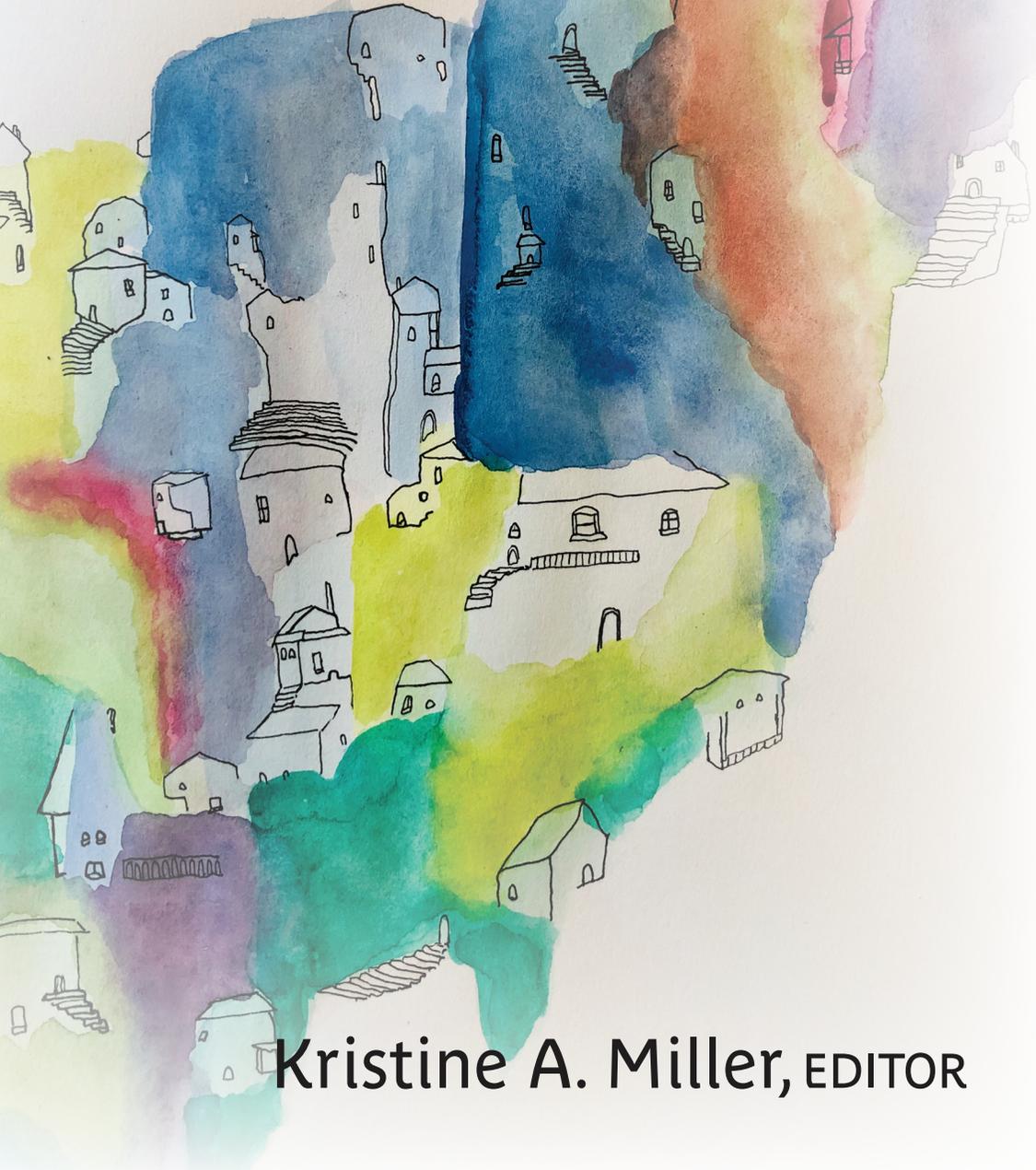
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# BUILDING HONORS CONTRACTS

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*Insights and Oversights*



Kristine A. Miller, EDITOR

# BUILDING HONORS CONTRACTS

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*Insights and Oversights*



# BUILDING HONORS CONTRACTS

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## *Insights and Oversights*

Edited by **Kristine A. Miller**

Series Editor | Jeffrey A. Portnoy  
Perimeter College, Georgia State University  
**National Collegiate Honors Council**  
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I am grateful to the many friends and colleagues whose work for the National Collegiate Honors Council—on the Board of Directors or staff, in committees or roundtables, through research or professional development, at conferences or online—has changed my professional life in all the best ways. You know who you are.

I also acknowledge the careful editorial attention of Jeffrey Portnoy, along with the support of NCHC's Publications Board and the design and layout expertise of Mitch Pruitt and Russell Helms. This volume is both readable and beautiful because of their help.

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Finally, I cannot thank my family enough. To Brian, Caitlin, and Dylan, thank you for everything, every day.

Kristine A. Miller



# BUILDING HONORS CONTRACTS

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## *Insights and Oversights*

*Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine. . . .*

—Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*



## INTRODUCTION

# **Building Honors Contracts: Insights and Oversights**

Kristine A. Miller  
Utah State University

This book asks an overdue question: can we build honors contracts that transcend the transactional? The word “contract” itself—as both noun and verb—delimits more possibilities than it reveals. The chapters collected here expand this restrictive term by reframing honors contracts as collaborative partnerships for experiential learning. While most, though not all, of the volume’s contributors accept standard definitions of honors contracts as “[e]nriched options within regular [non-honors] courses,” they also imagine many and varied possibilities for such enrichment (Schuman 33). The subtitle’s pairing of “Insights” and “Oversights” thus suggests not that the authors have seen it all or missed the point when it comes to honors contracts, but that contracts, like courses, benefit from the creative pedagogical approaches and thoughtful administrative practices that define honors education. Caitlin McCuskey’s *Home*, the cover art for this monograph, captures a key idea of the book as a whole: the work of building honors curricula is both imaginative and structural. The beauty of honors education, like that of the cover art, lies in both the scaffolding and color of its conceptual architecture. By mapping honors contracts onto that imaginative blueprint, this book empowers honors educators to build communities and curricula that welcome their various administrators, faculty members, and students home.

Acting together as a longer, more detailed framing of the volume than this brief introduction, Richard Badenhausen’s “Curriculum Gone Bad: The Case against Honors Contracts” and Shirley Shultz

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Myers and Geoffrey Whitebread’s “The Timeliness of Honors Contracts” establish the problem, historicize the practice, and reframe the question of honors contracts. In his opening gambit, Badenhauen plays devil’s advocate, challenging contributors to make the case for contracts by addressing five specific arguments against them. Myers and Whitebread then launch the defense in Chapter Two, rebutting the prosecution’s opening remarks by presenting evidence of contemporary contract success alongside a heavily researched historical overview grounding this pedagogical practice in the British tutorial model. Because the framing work of the first two chapters is so comprehensive, this introduction primarily highlights the contributors’ various approaches to our volume’s central argument: as part of the honors curriculum, contracts demand the same attention as courses, a point that all of the volume’s contributors make in various ways.

The pedagogical conversation surrounding contracts has to date been more practical than inspirational, perhaps because many institutions have framed honors contracts as necessary stopgaps—rather than pedagogical catalysts—within the honors curriculum. Significantly, ten of the volume’s thirteen chapters (including this introduction) cite Kambra Bolch’s very pragmatic 2005 case study, published in *Honors in Practice*, which “outlines the problems with contracting that developed over several years at Texas Tech University, comments on the process by which solutions were identified, and presents the solutions that were created” (49). Patrick Bahls’s more recent contribution to *Honors in Practice*, “Contracts for Honors Credit: Balancing Access, Equity, and Opportunities for Authentic Learning” surveys past scholarship (172–74), calls for new work (174), and argues that contracts can shape the educational experience of both honors and non-honors students. Building on this and other work concerning the role of advanced placement (Guzy) and experiential learning (DiLauro, Meyers, and Guertin) in honors education, this volume suggests that contracts expand more than they limit the honors curriculum. The contributors seek to inspire curricular innovation by explaining how contracts can foster academic curiosity and ignite research passion. They cite

contract examples from across disciplines, suggesting that mentored boundary-crossing, beyond the walls of the classroom, lets students take controlled risks with practical, lifelong rewards. The best contracts, they contend, challenge students to think creatively, ethically, and rigorously: whether their work is in civil engineering or art history, English or nursing, chemistry or communication studies, students can discover through honors contracts the limits, possibilities, and value of their own academic knowledge.

To make this point, the book's structure moves from the philosophical to the practical. Once readers have heard opening statements from both prosecution (Badenhausen) and defense (Myers and Whitebread) in Chapters One and Two, the volume's third and fourth chapters demonstrate how honors contracts can work as inclusive pedagogical tools. In Chapter Three, "Honors Contracts: Empowering Students and Fostering Autonomy in Honors Education," Anne Dotter introduces the compelling social justice argument that, particularly at a large research university, contracts can often successfully guide first-generation and under-represented groups of students through an unfamiliar range of academic expectations and requirements. Contracts do this work, she suggests, by building mentoring relationships, modeling independent and group work, accounting for financial constraints, teaching self-advocacy, and engaging faculty in recruiting and mentoring a broad range of students. Jon Hageman applies some of these ideas to non-traditional students at a much smaller commuter school in Chapter Four, "An Undeserved Reputation: How Contract Courses Can Work for a Small Honors Program," which illustrates how proactive, individualized contract advising "can provide access to honors for a highly diverse student body" (95).

The book's next three chapters explore specific benefits of contracts for both faculty and students. In Chapter Five, "One Hand Washes the Other: Designing Mutually Beneficial Honors Contracts," Antonina Bambina contends that positive faculty experiences with contracts lead directly to student success, and she therefore demonstrates through a series of examples the importance of intentional contract design focused on mutual benefit. Cindy S.

## INTRODUCTION

Ticknor and Shamim Khan examine in more detail how contracts support student success in Chapter Six, “Honors Contracts: A Scaffolding to Independent Inquiry,” which explores how contracts can systematically prepare students for success in advanced honors capstone work. James G. Snyder and Melinda Weisberg’s Chapter Seven, “Enhancing the Structure and Impact of Honors by Contract Projects with Templates and Research Hubs,” takes an innovative approach to systemizing contracts: they advocate for the strategic development of contract templates and research hubs as part of the scaffolding that Ticknor and Khan describe in Chapter Six.

Acknowledging all of these student and faculty benefits, the volume’s next four chapters create a toolkit for honors programs and colleges by describing some practical approaches to integrating honors contracts into a fully developed honors curriculum. In Chapter Eight, “Ensuring a Quality Honors Experience through Learning Contracts: Success beyond Our Wildest Dreams,” Julia A. Haseleu and Laurie A. Taylor share concrete ways of connecting project-based with classroom-based learning in honors curricula at two-year colleges. Starting from the premise that clear honors learning outcomes should define and shape the entire honors curriculum, Gary Wyatt argues in Chapter Nine, “A High-Impact Strategy for Honors Contract Courses,” for aligning requirements of honors contract proposals and assessment with those of more traditional courses. Erin E. Edgington turns in Chapter Ten, “Facilitating Feedback: The Benefits of Automation in Monitoring Completion of Honors Contracts,” to the practical task of introducing and automating standardized assessment rubrics for contracts at both the proposal and completion stages, changes that have both improved assessment and decreased paperwork for students and faculty at her mid-sized institution. Ken D. Thomas and Suzanne P. Hunter describe another practical approach to digital contract management in Chapter Eleven, “Moving Honors Contracts into the Digital Age: Processes, Impacts, and Opinions,” suggesting the importance and value of automating contracts, even at a very large research institution.

The volume concludes with my own contribution in Chapter Twelve, “Honors in Practice: Beyond the Classroom,” which circles

## INTRODUCTION

back to the philosophical issues that frame the volume as a whole. The chapter contests Badenhausen's charge that contracts are potentially counter-curricular with a reframing question: what if we could productively expand the curriculum by redefining both classroom and community in honors education? As the book's conclusion, the chapter asks not only why but also how to engage honors students in two pedagogical best practices particularly well suited to contracts: experiential learning and guided reflection, ideas that Bahls also explores briefly in his recent *Honors in Practice* piece. Challenging the conventional definition of contracts as course-based learning, this concluding chapter intends, as others in the volume do, to champion the flexibility of honors contracts and explore the central role these mentoring agreements can play in extending the honors community. The goal of this chapter, like that of the book as a whole, is to engage imaginations and thus start conversations about the possibilities for building honors contracts.

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# BUILDING HONORS CONTRACTS

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*Insights and Oversights*



## CHAPTER ONE

# Curriculum Gone Bad: The Case against Honors Contracts

RICHARD BADENHAUSEN  
WESTMINSTER COLLEGE

This volume offers a timely and much-needed discussion, for in spite of their apparent ubiquity across the honors landscape, contracts are not a feature of honors education that has received much attention. For example, the National Collegiate Honors Council’s (NCHC) “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” and its companion statement on honors colleges—documents meant to guide colleges and universities in curricular innovation, engaged pedagogy, and intentional learning—make no mention of contracts. Additionally, NCHC’s 2016 Census of U.S. Honors Programs and Colleges, which captured qualities of 408 responding member institutions, asked over a dozen questions about curricular features of honors programs and colleges, including queries about online education, distance learning, internships, study abroad, and service learning (Scott, Smith, and Cognard-Black). While the instrument also questioned programs about their use of contracts,

the summary data originally posted on the NCHC members' site omits any information about contracts, a curious lacuna. As for scholarship on honors contracts, the offerings are meager: up until 2020, NCHC's monograph series and journals have published only two essays on the topic, a mere twenty pages across two issues of *Honors in Practice*. One piece takes readers through the process of trying to improve the contract system at Texas Tech (Bolch), while the other is a short case study reviewing the value of extending a contracted course's work beyond a single semester at Penn State Brandywine (DiLauro, Meyers, and Guertin). In our guiding documents, data instruments, and publications, the issue of contracts is virtually invisible.

Why might that be? Is it possible that contracts are one of the dirty little secrets of honors education? Like a loud uncle at the Thanksgiving table, are they glaringly obvious but embarrassing enough that we turn away to more genteel and interesting matters? Or are contracts so present in our professional lives that we simply take them for granted or forget their existence, much like the air we breathe? After all, when NCHC's 2012 Member Institution Survey asked respondents in passing, "Do you have honors contract courses?"—the first of two occasions the organization collected firm data on this question—a whopping 60% of the 446 participating institutions answered in the affirmative. Interestingly, there was very little difference in the usage of contracts by honors colleges and programs: the numbers were slightly larger in colleges (62.5%) than programs (59.6%), while two-year institutions showed the greatest employment of the instrument (65.2%).<sup>1</sup> In fact, two-year institutions may have thought most intentionally about the use of contracts, for Theresa A. James's *A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges* contains an appendix that collects sample contracts from seven two-year colleges. Of the 38 questions on the 2012 NCHC survey that required yes/no answers, only three topic areas showed a closer alignment between the practices of honors colleges and programs than contracts did. Contracts are something we use no matter what honors looks like on our campuses, so it is certainly time we put this practice under our collective microscope

to examine its operation, impact on student learning, and collateral effect on how we position and enact honors education at our respective institutions.

When used properly, honors contracts can be wonderful mechanisms to facilitate creative learning opportunities for students, but they offer no panacea and can even be detrimental when employed for the wrong reasons or without clear intention. Thoughtful contracts offer many potential benefits: they can round out a student's course of study, provide flexibility in the curriculum and in a student's schedule, and encourage independent thinking and self-directed learning, two hallmarks of honors education. For honors students in high-credit-hour majors or in majors with very prescriptive curriculums—pre-professional programs present a special challenge in this respect—contracts provide the opportunity to complete honors work that would be essentially impossible to finish otherwise. Even so, their ease of use and tendency to operate under the radar make them particularly ripe for abuse. Contracts can devolve when employed as a stopgap measure—a substitute for the deep learning that marks honors—and a crutch for under-resourced programs. This essay seeks to make the case *against* the use of contracts as a thought exercise designed to help programs looking to implement or reevaluate contract systems, and thus to do a better job of managing this tool. My purpose is not to complain, but rather to identify potential blind spots and frequent traps in the positioning and administration of contracts with the hope of avoiding those pitfalls and enhancing student learning. In particular, I focus on five major areas in which contracts can present problems: their alteration of the honors experience and negative effects on the position of an honors program or college on campus; the impact on the honors learning environment; the threat they can pose to honors community; the challenges they introduce in assessing student work; and their complicated relationship to resource allocation, faculty compensation, and equity, all of which can result in unsatisfying compromises.

I write from the position of an honors administrator who has the luxury of not having to employ contracts at my own campus

because of a fully developed and flexible stand-alone honors curriculum, which is reinforced by a healthy budget and favorable staffing arrangements. The relatively small size of our operation also creates conditions that make a dependence on contracts less likely, even though many small schools use contracts. Westminster College is a comprehensive institution with a mix of liberal arts and pre-professional programs. Approximately 1,750 undergraduates and 500 graduate students enroll in classes across four schools and the honors college, whose roughly 250 students make up about 14 percent of the undergraduate population. Students at Westminster may satisfy the college's general education requirements in one of two ways: through the standard WCore program or by completing 24–48 credit hours in the honors college, which has two pathways through a core curriculum of nine interdisciplinary, team-taught classes focused on primary texts and a conversation-based pedagogy. Honors seminars—which were first offered at Westminster in 1986—are staffed by about 30 faculty, 5 of whom have either full or shared lines in the honors college and 25 of whom have appointments in disciplinary departments across all four schools and who staff one or more classes in honors as part of their regular teaching loads. Students may come into the honors college via one of two routes: a traditional entry point directly from high school or a lateral entry point for transfer students. Surveys consistently indicate that students enter the honors college because of the opportunities to challenge themselves in a rigorous learning environment, explore an interdisciplinary curriculum, join a community of high-achieving students, and participate in a conversation-based classroom. Our recruiting practices are undergirded by a commitment to diversity: 25 percent of the fall 2018 cohort are first-generation students while that year's lateral entry class consists of more than 50 percent students of color. Average first-year retention for the past five years is 90 percent.

Yet despite my own situation at Westminster College, I am familiar with contract systems in various iterations and understand why they are needed. As an experienced NCHC program reviewer who often encounters the use of contracts in a wide variety of

honors programs and colleges, I am troubled when contracts become a replacement for an intentional, well-developed curriculum or when they emerge as a necessary compromise because of local circumstances. For example, program directors or deans who seek learning opportunities for honors students when department chairs are reluctant to “release” disciplinary faculty to teach might feel that contracts are their only option; however, accepting this option paradoxically makes planning a coherent, stable, dependable curriculum for honors students increasingly difficult. Such cyclical situations can result in unintentional signaling across campus that honors learning is somehow “lesser” or unworthy of the long-term commitment of faculty lines. Although imagining chemistry majors, for instance, completing basic curricular requirements via a mechanism like contracts is ludicrous, the fact remains that students must move through their programs of study, and those of us in charge of helping with that process must figure out ways to operate within the boundaries of various limitations that often center on resource issues. I am thus extremely sympathetic to the plight of my fellow honors leaders when they find themselves dependent on contracts. In identifying the problems that can surface with contracts and the collateral damage that can occur with their misuse, I aim not to criticize colleagues or trivialize the challenges they face; instead, I hope to start a conversation about how this potentially damaging practice might be improved and to provide directors and deans with ammunition when requesting new curricular resources.

The most common deployment of contracts occurs when students enroll in a non-honors course and “convert” that class to an honors-equivalent course through additional work, such as outside reading, independent research, or some other enhanced learning activity. The intentions are admirable: honors students looking to stretch themselves can go beyond the learning experience of non-honors students and deepen or expand their knowledge of the topic in question. Yet when one looks under the hood of this arrangement, a number of problems surface. First and foremost, dispersing honors students across the non-honors curriculum and claiming they are actually doing honors work via contracts sometimes

ends up equating honors work with merely “doing more.” A hallmark of honors recruiting discussions with prospective students is that honors is specifically not about *more* but *different* work: deeper learning, interdisciplinary thinking, or community engagement. Contracts can draw on all these strategies, of course, but the arrangement is often (mis)understood by both students and faculty as merely “adding on” to a non-honors class. It is easy to understand why such misconceptions find particularly healthy soil in which to germinate, particularly when honors has not established a firm and distinctive identity or sharply defined learning outcomes across campus. In such cases, faculty often fill in the resulting vacuum with their own misinformed narratives about honors, often concluding simply that honors is about “more” and “harder” work. Students often share this impression, since the more high school honors—leadership positions, Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and volunteerism—they accrued, the more “successful” they appeared to be. Unfortunately, contracts reinforce this mania for adding on just at the time in their educational lives when students should be paring back the breadth of their involvement and starting to make choices about focusing on areas of passion. Honors can play an important role in that developmental process, but framing contracts as add-ons serves only to thwart the transformation.

The transactional nature of a “contract,” a term derived from the Latin for engaging in a formal agreement, also worries me because it puts the contracted parties—teacher and student—in a potentially vexed power relationship. The honors classroom is usually set up not as an exchange of valued goods but a shared journey on which faculty and students embark as fellow learners, pursuing hard questions in a conversational exchange about difficult texts and concepts. This opportunity is often new in college, since many of our honors students attended high schools where learning *was* understood overtly (or at least operated covertly) in transactional terms: student X did Y and then received Z from the teacher, which for most honors students meant a good grade. The goal in high school was thus to figure out what the teacher “wanted” and then to deliver the goods to earn a top score. We see this transactional

thinking surface in the language students use to describe their performance: they remark that the teacher “gave” them a particular grade. One of the positive features of the recent culture of assessment in higher education is that the focus on learning outcomes makes explicit the skills necessary to achieve a certain standard in a course, which in turn should encourage learners to take greater responsibility for their achievement and diminish their tendency to imagine that teachers “bestow” grades. In many high schools, however, honors students have been “successful” because of their skill in guessing a teacher’s view and then mirroring back that view in written and spoken work. Of course, acting as a mirror is not a very good way to develop as a learner or a fully actualized human being, but students are often loath to abandon a skill that has apparently served them well in their lives before college.

Honors education, however, tends to push back against the paradigm of students as passive vessels filled with the teacher’s “narration,” a practice that results in education as the “act of depositing” that Paolo Freire and others have so strongly criticized (71, 72). bell hooks builds on Freire’s critique of this banking model of education by highlighting the importance of developing a critical consciousness of traditional models of education that “reinforce domination,” encourage “obedience to authority,” and cultivate the “unjust exercise of power” (4, 5). A more recent account surfaces in William Deresiewicz’s polemical attack on elite institutions that do little more than reduce students to “docile subject[s]” (79), individuals with “little intellectual curiosity and a stunted sense of purpose . . . heading meekly in the same direction, great at what they’re doing but with no idea why they’re doing it” (3). At its best, honors pedagogy resists and even actively thwarts educational models that turn students into passive instruments of powerful faculty, aspiring instead to give learners agency and to foster collaborative partnerships between faculty and students, as Kenneth A. Bruffee describes in his work on sharing authority in the classroom. For Bruffee, “Professors and students alike construct and maintain knowledge in continual conversation with their peers” (xi). Contracts thus worry me because they can put those two parties

in potentially compromised positions of negotiation; indeed, the relationship is codified in an actual contract that is explicitly transactional in nature. That separate administrative document also reframes a faculty member's work with the student as somehow outside the normal workload. The professor may see the student doing contracted work in a different light, perhaps even holding the student to a higher standard.

This perception introduces another potential problem with contracts: they surreptitiously diminish the power of the honors learning community in the classroom not only by separating honors students from each other but by tacitly positioning the honors student doing contracted work as somehow different from the other students in the class. I remind families considering Westminster's Honors College that one often unacknowledged benefit is our unique community of interesting, curious students who have all agreed to embark together on this exciting learning journey. Let's face it: you can't just walk down to the corner market at home and find a group of high-achieving students from around the world who are eager to discuss challenging texts and ideas with you twice a week for two hours at a time. That honors intellectual community is special and hard to replicate. We do our students no favors by establishing curricular practices that separate them from their honors peers: the whole point of honors is to gather such students together in a learning environment that is enhanced specifically because of that unique community. Many programs and colleges ground their honors communities in a residential experience, imagining the mere circumstance of living near someone will establish deep connections, but that is a false equivalency missing the point of honors education, as I have written elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The most powerful community comes from struggling together in the honors classroom, trying out ideas with a collection of students from different backgrounds and pursuing various majors, so that perspectives can be challenged with a range of vocabularies and disciplinary lenses.

This collaborative work is central to the honors community. Indeed, NCHC's "Definition of Honors Education" emphasizes the power of honors learning communities to "foster a culture of

thinking, growing, and inquiring” by “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.” If the power of honors does indeed lie in such shared learning, our pedagogical practices must foster collaborative work. Contracts too often undermine such communal collaboration, especially when dispersed widely across a program or college. Because the outcome of contracted work is so often an additional paper or project, the contract actually has the effect of driving the student further away from faculty and fellow students because such work is typically solitary in nature. Even group contracts can isolate students in this way: when a critical mass of contracted honors students—let’s say three or four—find themselves in the same class and collaborate on contract work, the project can end up being disruptive to the overall class dynamic if the professor singles out that group or treats those honors students differently from the rest of the class. Such special treatment can also exacerbate hard feelings resulting from the idea that honors is elitist.

By fundamentally changing the nature of both student work and faculty engagement, the conversion of non-honors classes into supposed honors-equivalent academic experiences through an agreement to tack on a few activities can also result in creating what might be called an “honors light” curriculum with scaled-down expectations that implicitly place the honors program as a whole in an oddly vulnerable position. The very suggestion that the learning experience of a contracted class is equivalent to a stand-alone honors class—after all, the student receives academic credit for both—opens honors programs and colleges up to potential exploitation by administrators who may not see the need for assigning appropriate resources to honors or may even try to cut budgets. Such circumstances are particularly problematic for honors programs because they typically do not have dedicated faculty; making the case for staffing appropriate to the number of students served by a program becomes increasingly difficult if the academic unit is

already making do with its current resources. The higher education community has actually gone down this road before when it started accepting AP credit substitutions for core requirements: the ultimate destination is not pretty. We have seen the damaging effect that move has had on honors curricula, requirements, and even enrollments. As Annmarie Guzy has noted in her examination of the national move to use AP credits to accelerate students through state educational systems in order to save taxpayers money, “The traditional liberal arts foundation of honors education is being gutted” (6). If used indiscriminately and without well-defined criteria, contracts may have a similar effect: limiting the amount of time students spend in fully developed honors academic experiences. It is probably time for NCHC to collect more data about the use of contracts, to explore the degree to which institutions’ dependency on them is increasing, and even to consider introducing a statement about their appropriate usage in the “Basic Characteristics” documents. Those NCHC characterizations of honors programs and colleges already offer targets for the percentage of honors coursework that should constitute a student’s undergraduate experience; it seems fitting to discuss whether language limiting the percentage of contracted work makes sense, too.

Focusing on the appropriate amount of contracted work raises a crucial larger question: who should be teaching honors students? One of the most insidious features of contracts is that they can serve as stopgaps for under-resourced programs by handing off the responsibility of instructing honors students to disciplinary departments and non-honors faculty. They also potentially allow administrators to take advantage of staffing situations in honors by exploiting faculty: contract work is typically uncompensated even though students are registering for credit hours for which they have paid tuition. Students, too, can shirk their educational responsibilities with contracts that help them to evade particularly challenging core honors courses, often in the sciences. If programs have rigorous GPA requirements tied to maintaining scholarships, students will sometimes use contracts as an end run around these punitive measures. One particular honors program for which I conducted

a review depended so heavily on contracts—primarily because of resource constraints and an underdeveloped core honors curriculum—that some faculty members saw the tool as providing a “pipeline” out of honors for students. At that same institution, contracts were so divorced from honors learning outcomes and the system of establishing a contract so lax that the registrar ended up challenging the honors equivalency credit on multiple occasions, a situation that is unfortunate for students, faculty, and administrators. Kambra Bolch reports similar problems with quality control at Texas Tech, detailing situations in which numerous students earned credit for contracted work, even though they had not completed all of the assignments or faculty had ignored obvious plagiarism (which was later caught by an administrator responsible for signing off on the contract) (51–52). Clearly, all of these examples suggest curricula gone wrong because of inadequate resources, guidelines, and oversight.

By definition, honors contracts are ad hoc arrangements, and consequently, they operate outside conventional curricular checks and balances that seek to ensure quality in a student’s learning experience. Such processes map individual courses within a larger coherent curriculum, identify and align course learning goals with program- or college-wide learning outcomes, and oversee the content of courses. Contracts become problematic when programs or colleges have no specific learning outcomes that tie contract learning to larger honors learning goals. Rather than focusing on pedagogy and learning, contract forms that emphasize book-keeping exacerbate this disconnection between contracts and curriculum. Consistent assessment of student work across scores of honors contracts is, of course, difficult, far more so than in a traditional class where student achievement is being sorted within a much larger sample size of high-achieving students. Too often with contracts, then, virtually anything goes. This inconsistency in standards raises serious questions about equity, among other issues. When standards are diffuse or unclear, the ability of students to accomplish their goals becomes harder, while the ability of faculty to assert their own (often unstated) criteria for quality becomes

easier. Another matter related to equity is the fact that some departments and disciplines are typically easier to work with in arranging contracts, which puts students majoring in programs that are more hostile toward contracts on unequal footing with their honors peers interacting with friendlier academic units.

In contrast to this contract model, NCHC's "Basic Characteristics" statements emphasize a deliberate and intentional process for moving faculty into the honors classroom: "The criteria for selection of honors faculty include exceptional teaching skills, the ability to provide intellectual leadership and mentoring for able students, and support for the mission of honors education." The arrangement for contracts, however, is too often reactionary, unintentional, and last-minute, a concession (note again the language of transaction) based on having to fall back on a pact that all parties would avoid if the more optimal opportunity of a stand-alone honors course existed. Contracts are thus all about compromise. In many cases, a faculty member from a disciplinary department being asked to contract a class for honors credit may have little awareness of the honors curriculum or the special needs of honors students. Rarely are those instructors given comprehensive guidance about how to elevate the work in their class to a level appropriate for honors. Such faculty will almost always use a disciplinary lens to both present and evaluate work, even if that lens runs counter to the orientation on which honors is founded at an institution. The disciplinary unit may even develop some hostility toward honors as a result of these arrangements, for it has most likely already been asked to offer honors sections of introductory courses and now it is being requested to devote limited faculty resources to accommodate honors again in the form of contracts. This incessant, annoying negotiation to establish curricular offerings, which other academic programs across campus take for granted, can become exhausting for honors directors and deans over time. Honors administrators are simply doing their job, but others at the institution imagine they are doing honors yet another favor.

Like faculty, students are too often left begging for a fully developed academic experience when faced with contracted honors

coursework. Contracts obviously take an independent study approach to learning, which should be reserved for juniors and seniors who have developed autonomy, sophisticated research interests, and a toolkit of skills they can draw on to work independently. Too often, however, contracts are used earlier in a student's career to satisfy general education requirements and can thus set up a student to fail, particularly if the process is not structured well, or the outcomes and expectations are not clearly established and explained. Yet the structure can become more confining than liberating. A thinker like Foucault would see the special administrative practices surrounding contracts as intentional methods of sorting, classifying, and controlling students in service of the larger institution's need to regulate activity and train students in a way that normalizes behavior. The administrative apparatus surrounding contracted work is thus akin to the examination and "*its documentary techniques, [which] make each individual a 'case,'*" as Foucault describes the situation. Ultimately, he argues, such practices are expressions of power upon the individual "as he may be described, judged, measured, compared with others" (191, italics in original). I wonder if regular educational pathways might provide students with more agency, freedom, and support, especially early in their career.

Other challenges for some populations of learners include the inherent biases of contract systems. For example, first-generation students and students from other traditionally underrepresented groups typically face unique obstacles advocating for themselves and seeking out learning experiences like contracts that depend on self-advocacy or a more nuanced awareness of how the intricacies of the institution operate. The social capital that emerges from networking relationships with faculty is a benefit that more privileged students may take for granted, but research has shown that while mentoring support from faculty is *especially* important for minority students (Baker 636), students from such traditionally underrepresented groups face more challenges in cultivating these crucial relationships. According to one literature review, "data suggest that first-generation, low-income, and racial/ethnic minority college students are less likely to develop such relationships"

because of a wide variety of factors including struggles with finding appropriate mentors, reluctance to seek out accommodations, underuse of faculty office hours, unwillingness to engage in “help-seeking behaviors,” and even reluctance on the part of faculty to respond to requests for help from minority students (Schwartz et al. 52). All of these features stack the deck against such students when it comes to using contracts to help negotiate completion of honors requirements. As a result, programs that use contracts as a significant feature of their learning portfolios should be intentional about ensuring that students from traditionally underrepresented groups receive special mentoring around the contract opportunity and other pieces of the so-called “hidden curriculum.”

Because contracts often present a fundamental threat to the distinctiveness of mission, course design, and pedagogy that define well-developed honors programs and colleges, they should be used extremely carefully, sparingly, and intentionally. Otherwise, programs and colleges put themselves in very vulnerable positions by suggesting that the honors learning experience is like a light switch that can simply be thrown on and off with a one-page form and a few signatures or that there is little difference between the nature of work done in a disciplinary department and in the honors classroom. The idea that a disciplinary class can be “converted” to honors by simply doing more work in that discipline—the most common form of contract—calls into question the uniqueness of honors itself. Bolch reports that one of the primary complaints at Texas Tech concerned the lack of distinctiveness of the work that allowed the contracted course to satisfy honors requirements: “[C]onsistent feedback from students indicated that either they perceived these extra papers negatively, as something of a nuisance or hurdle, or neutrally, as identical to writing any other paper” (51). Guzy reminds us in the context of her discussion trying to disrupt the equivalency of AP credit and honors work that “calling coursework ‘honors’ by simply offering more of the same—more papers, more tests, more books, more labs—is indeed a waste of time and tuition. We must challenge ourselves to teach something substantively different” (8). We should take this cautionary call to action

seriously when we think about the place of contracts in our curricula. Programs would benefit from a backward design approach when considering the use of contracts: first identify what gaps need addressing in a curriculum or what learning outcomes are desired, and then consider if there are other creative programmatic ways to achieve those goals, especially ways to employ practices that are clearly aligned with mission.

In fact, I would like to end on that optimistic, forward-looking note by emphasizing key features that should accompany a “fully developed” contract system—my nod to the language of NCHC’s “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” is not coincidental. Intentionality, transparency, consistency, and alignment with mission should rule the day. Clarity around the contract process is crucial, so that all students, regardless of their background or preparation, can benefit from them; and faculty should engage in conversations about the learning outcomes associated with contracts so that expectations are clear to students and contracted work is positioned strongly as honors work, rather than as an add-on or compromise in the absence of a “real” honors class. Ideally, the administrative apparatus associated with contracts would be available online and easy to use, minimizing as much as possible the need for students to chase down faculty in search of signatures and hold extended conversations about how the non-honors course will be enhanced. Disciplinary faculty who engage in such relationships with honors students should be trained about the goals and identity of honors and provided with clear guidelines about the purpose, execution, and evaluation of contracted work; they should also be made aware of the potential pitfalls of a contract arrangement, especially those involving classroom dynamics. At its heart, honors education is an aspirational enterprise, an approach to teaching and learning that inspires and challenges students in the belief that setting high standards will allow them to have transformative experiences they would not experience in other non-honors settings. I hope that we can hold contract systems to the same standards.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The data around use of contracts collected in the NCHC's 2016 Census of U.S. Honors Programs and Colleges were shared in "Demography of Honors: The Census of U.S. Honors Programs and Colleges" (Scott, Smith, and Cognard-Black), which showed a similar use of contracts across honors institutions: 64% of honors colleges and programs indicated their presence (203).

<sup>2</sup>See Badenhausen, "Honors Housing: Castle or Prison?"

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## CHAPTER TWO

# The Timeliness of Honors Contracts

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With roots in a tutorial educational approach introduced by the ancient Greeks and made famous at Oxford and Cambridge, honors contracts in the United States emerged as tutorial arrangements in the late nineteenth century. Early honors programs at Harvard and other universities sought to counter an emphasis on practical training in US higher education after the Civil War with more flexible programs of study, small seminars, and tutorials (Capuana 21–25; Wolken; Repko et al. 28). This curricular reform spanned disciplines and responded to two key changes in education: the late-nineteenth-century growth of graduate education, particularly in the sciences, modeled on German universities that emphasized both research and the consolidation of disciplines (Capuana 19–20; Menand 97), and the early-twentieth-century rise of liberal education in humanities disciplines. These changes caused a marked shift in the US from a belief in the power of standardized vocational programs to fulfill democratic ideals to the

conviction that democracy depended upon the development of individual research and other interests or talents, often through the tutorial model (Harvard President Emeritus Charles W. Eliot, ctd. in Unger 178; Aydelotte 12–19; Capuana 19–21, 25). In this pedagogical milieu, Frank Aydelotte pioneered a well-developed honors program at Swarthmore, based on the tutorials of Oxford and Cambridge, which he had experienced as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford (Aydelotte 30–44; Rinn 70–73; Carnicom 49). His tutorial system is commonly acknowledged as the first modern US honors program (Capuana 12; Guzy, *Honors Composition* 6; Rinn 70; Humphrey 13).

This brief historical context for honors education reveals the distinguished roots of contracts and suggests their overlooked pedagogical value. For reasons Richard Badenhausen makes clear, contracts have instead held a suspect and marginalized curricular position, even though the results of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) Census of U.S. Honors Programs and Colleges in both 2012 and 2016 show that approximately three-fifths of programs/colleges—regardless of institutional type—use contracts (Scott, Smith, and Cognard-Black 208; Scott). That is a sizable number for a form of learning that has earned relatively limited respect. Moreover, NCHC’s publications, conference programs, and listserv illustrate how many practitioners of this pedagogy have developed innovative approaches and best practices that add rigor, flexibility, and oversight to honors contract work.

Our central claim in this chapter is that, anchored in the tutorial model, contracts exemplify the best of honors pedagogy when they cultivate personalized, mentored learning and ensure consistent, documented quality. This tutorial frame responds to Badenhausen’s first concern that contracts represent an “alteration of the honors experience” that has “negative effects on the position of an honors program or college on campus” (5). Ensuring quality necessitates oversight, and assessment of learning outcomes responds to Badenhausen’s fourth issue about rigor through assessment (5, 11–12). As part of oversight, one section of the Gallaudet University honors contract template goes some way toward addressing Badenhausen’s

third concern about a loss of the power of an honors learning community that contracts might cause (10). We argue that at Gallaudet University, a tutorial frame emphasizing a close instructor-student relationship facilitates meaningful contracts. These contracts not only maximize faculty-student contact in classes of any format, but they also accommodate exploration and questioning in a range of research disciplines, from team-taught humanities discussions to innovative investigations in STEM courses, including their labs.

Privately run but largely federally funded, Gallaudet is a small learner-centered university of 800 majority deaf undergraduates and 400 graduate students; it features an honors program of 45–50 students, about six percent of the undergraduate population. Within the liberal arts and pre-professional programs, a good number of faculty are willing and even eager to work in depth with honors students. Aligning the mentoring relationship featured in contracts with the respected tradition of tutorial learning resonates with faculty invested in guiding honors students focused on their own individualized learning. Our students also appreciate contracts built on this hallmark feature of the tutorial model; in a spring 2018 focus group of honors students engaged in contracts, students revealed that they most valued one-on-one meetings with the instructor for deepening their learning and increasing their confidence as learners and future professionals (Whitebread and Myers). The students' experiences are not unique. Three honors-related dissertations reporting mixed experiences with contracts find or imply that students appreciate contracts when they meet two conditions: 1) student and faculty customize the work to fit a student's interests, and 2) contracts involve significant time with the instructor (Bohnelein 81–82; Huggett 44, 46–47, 51–53, 59–60, 156, 163–64; Patino 11–12, 63–64). These are the conditions that describe the tutorial model for contracts. Although the terms “independent study” and “tutorial” are sometimes used interchangeably, tutorials involve a greater degree of supervision and emphasize the mentoring relationship and are thus more relevant to our contract argument. In fact, tutorial contracts acknowledge the necessary dependence of budding scholars on their faculty mentors, a dependence that

allows students to develop the skills and confidence they need to embark on the more independent work of an honors thesis or capstone project.

Perhaps the tutorial tradition in honors education surprises some honors practitioners used to the contemporary emphasis on discussion-based seminars. Tutorials grew out of a period of reform in higher education when leaders such as Charles W. Eliot at Harvard in the late nineteenth century and Woodrow Wilson at Princeton in the early twentieth century embraced liberal education over the Taylorism of vocational and standardized curricula and sought to loosen requirements to fit individual interests (ctd. in Capuana 25). What these reformers valued in the tutorial system in particular is a benefit of the best contract learning today: an emphasis on the “social relationship in learning,” which is realized in the tutorial’s close relationship between faculty and student (Capuana 24, 183). In the first modern honors program at Swarthmore, Aydelotte embraced this emphasis; in fact, he adapted his tutorial system to include very small groups of students precisely for the increased social stimulation of multiple student learners (Rinn 73). With small discussion-based seminars as a regular offering of many honors programs and colleges today, individual or very small group tutorials organized through contracts provide another means to enhance honors learning. Significantly, such tutorial work can lay the foundation of early mentoring and preliminary investigation upon which the more focused and detailed exploration of honors thesis or capstone work can build.

In addition to their role in Swarthmore’s honors program, versions of the tutorial system and other individualized learning became central to a number of honors programs, first at many small eastern liberal arts colleges (Capuana 21), then later at public and private institutions of various sizes (Capuana 26; Rinn 64–70). These programs lasted until after the Second World War, when massive growth in student numbers (Gumport et al. 2) and a focus on preparation in the sciences and technology in the face of the Cold War and its space race brought back standardization (Capuana 171–76). Yet honors education continued to gain attention as a way

to challenge the most academically able students, this time by making the case that going beyond standardized curricula was essential to secure US “leadership in the free world” (Capuana 171). Related to this push, a 1957 Rockefeller grant funded the establishment of the first national honors organization, the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS), replaced by the National Collegiate Honors Council in 1966 (Capuana 4–5, 171–72, 240). At the first ICSS conference, the attendees (only 43 participants from 27 institutions) crafted a list characterizing honors that drew upon some features of the tutorial system (Rinn 75); this list evolved into NCHC’s “Basic Characteristics” (Rinn 76).

Even as honors education was re-organizing, students of the 1960s were protesting both the Vietnam War and racism and rebelling against standardization in higher education, a rebellion that sparked government action. What was then called the US Office of Education led the governmental response to this student pressure: they highlighted and connected independent study to honors education. A 1966 report makes clear how important this philosophical connection became: “Honors Programs are called independent study programs on some campuses . . . because, more than anything else, independent study seems to characterize ‘honors’ work” (Hatch and Bennet 1). By the 1970s, others also began to tie innovation in higher education to the creation of essential connections across independent study, self-directed study, and contract learning (Givens; Mayville; Feeny and Riley; Burke). While the nineteenth-century tutorial system gradually faded from honors education, these related forms of learning—independent study, self-directed study, and contract learning—created a historical bridge between the beginnings of honors education in tutorials and the tutorial model of contracts today.

Relying not on this historical context but rather on reports of poor contract quality, much NCHC literature doubts—or even dismisses—the possibility of honors-worthy contracts. In the September 2017 NCHC listserv announcement for this monograph, Jeffrey A. Portnoy, General Editor of the NCHC Monograph Series, calls contracts a “controversial topic” (“Monograph Call for Papers

on Honors Contracts”). The main complaint revolves around the idea that contracts just mean tacking on more work of the kind already assigned in the contracted course (Bolch, “Contracting in Honors” 51; James 30–31; Guzy, “AP” 8; Badenhausen 11). In addition, all three editions of the NCHC monograph *Honors Programs at Smaller Colleges* diminish the value of contracts with the comment that although contracts may be cost effective, “it is probable that Honors options within regular classes are often the least rewarding curricular option for Honors students” (Schuman 49). This deflation by a champion of honors dismays us, given the roots of contracts in tutorials that once enjoyed prominence in honors programs at small, private liberal arts colleges.

On the positive side, we found six NCHC monographs that discuss contracts neutrally or supportively (“NCHC Monograph Series”). As Badenhausen notes, “two-year institutions may have thought most intentionally about the use of contracts” (4). Indeed, besides the monograph Badenhausen cites, Theresa A. James’s *A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges* (2006), two prior publications bolster the claim of leadership on contracts by two-year institutions. First, a survey of community and junior colleges that asks about contract use appeared in a 1975 dissertation sponsored in part by NCHC, *A Statistical Portrait of Honors Programs in Two-Year Colleges* by Michael A. Olivas. Second, NCHC and two other educational organizations published a 1983 handbook on honors education at two-year colleges that includes an explanation of contracts and the forms to document them (Bentley-Baker et al.).

It seems likely that the increasing use of contracts despite their vexed reputation explains why contracts have continued to receive attention through two more informal channels besides publications: NCHC’s conferences and listserv. In an email, Jeffrey A. Portnoy reports that at the 1996 NCHC Conference, he was a panel participant in a standing-room-only Developing in Honors workshop on honors contracts. Digitally searchable conference programs from 1997 and 2002–2017 reveal nothing for 1997 but one presentation and one Idea Exchange (IE) topic about contracts in 2002

(*Conference Program Archive*). Since then, interest has expanded rapidly; NCHC conferences have included 41 more presentations focusing on or involving contracts, including 28 general sessions; three Developing in Honors (DIH) sessions; two Best Honors Administrative Practice (BHAP) sessions (one of which had multiple repeats over two years) on integrating contracts with honors learning outcomes; three roundtables; four IE topics; one poster presentation; and five consultants. A number of presentations, some by honors faculty or administrators and others involving students presenting on their own or with honors faculty or administrators, have centered on specific contract experiences. Several presenters have offered specific guidelines or forms and addressed risks or pitfalls in contracting, and in the last decade, a number have focused on learning outcomes and assessment as the key to strengthening contracts. Conference programs also show consultants naming contracts as an area of expertise (two in 2003; one in 2006, repeated in 2007; one in 2012, repeated in 2013; and one in 2015).

NCHC listserv threads mentioning contracts appear in the first year of available archives (1997) and continue for nearly 20 years. The number of threads alone signals the attention contracts have received from NCHC members. Out of a total 52 threads, 28 focus loosely on topics about contracts, such as sharing opinions on their value. Other postings treat a variety of questions about record-keeping, oversight, faculty workload, and compensation; still others offer specific examples of contracts, ask for responses to surveys, or call for DIH session leaders with expertise in contracts. Within this range, a review of selected threads over 17 years reveals that early postings debated the merits of contracts while later postings turned to sharing materials and advising on effective practices. This gradual shift in topics suggests the development of best practices for creating and managing contracts, work continued and deepened by the chapters of this monograph.

The earliest archived thread with active replies, “Any Presentations on the Goals of Honors Courses” (27 Oct. 1998), contains three posts encapsulating the controversy over the value of contracts. One critical listserv subscriber from an honors college at a

large university notes that faculty unwillingness to invest time in contracts contributes to lack of quality (Stark). Having “seen examples of viable [honors] contracts and good educational experiences that can come from them,” another subscriber nevertheless claims a lack of enthusiasm for two reasons: the subscriber agrees with the point about faculty reluctance to engage in contracts and adds the necessity but impossibility of oversight for what could be a thousand contracts at a time: “No, thanks. Stake me out on a hill of fire ants instead” (Wainscott). This humorous image makes the subscriber’s antipathy clear, but the idea of overseeing thousands of contracts at a time seems hyperbolic. A third subscriber defends contracts as affording a “useful, flexible option” that allows students to complete honors requirements along with major requirements, albeit with clear restrictions and guidelines to ensure quality—“different and better, not more” of the same work required in a regular course (Zubizarreta, “Any Presentation”). It is possible that valuations of contracts may depend on the culture, mission, or other important guiding principles of an institution. That is, institutions investing in personalized learning and/or one-on-one professor-student interactions will more likely succeed with contracting. Positive valuations may also result from successful quality-control measures, such as thoughtfully constructed guidelines, practices, and assessments.

From the early to mid 2000s, listserv subscribers moved on to grapple with specific practices to improve contract quality. In one such thread from this period, “Contract Courses” (12–13 Dec. 2002), subscribers from three large honors colleges and one mid-size university (Bolch, Portz, Sederberg, and Smith) mention concerns with uneven quality and limited oversight, but they also suggest growing confidence in certain practices: explicit contract guidelines and forms, restrictions on the number of contracts or the level of courses with contracts, and faculty compensation (per course or in the overall reward structure). In a 2005 thread, “FW: Learning by Contract” (Clothier), a similar discussion of helpful practices occurs among subscribers from institutions comparable to those represented in the 2002 thread: four large and one mid-size (Conway, Primoza,

Reibstein, Vaughn, and Saiff). By 2015, in a thread called “Honors Contracts” (Holgado), John Zubizarreta suggests a search of the list-serv archives and includes links to websites of various institutions for contract models, while Christian M. Brady includes a link to his contract (“Honors Option”) form. This latest thread completes the seventeen-year arc of conversations that chart growing confidence in the development of contract best practices.

Nevertheless, the disrepute of contracts remains. Badenhausen implies their devaluation when he writes that at his institution he “has the luxury of not having to employ contracts . . . because of a fully developed and flexible stand-alone honors curriculum,” which features discussion-based seminars (5–6). Given the framework and practices presented in this chapter, we counter that our small, learner-centered institution affords the luxury of employing contracts that exemplify the considerable strengths of tutorial learning. For one thing, in a tutorial model focused on student interests above and beyond course coverage, it is simply not possible for contracts just to require more work of the sort already included in the course and thus to lack the depth central to honors learning (Badenhausen 11). Second, when supported by the culture of an institution and its honors program, the close mentoring in a tutorial contract allows for dialogue and agency, rather than the passivity that Badenhausen warns against (14–15). In a recent *Honors in Practice* essay, Patrick Bahls accepts Badenhausen’s emphasis on community as a defining feature of honors education, commenting that honors programs and colleges are “defined as often by a sense of community as by a coherent curriculum” (171). Bahls’s institution “limits the number of credits students may earn through contracts” to prevent “sacrificing community cohesion” (178), but he notes that students’ reflections on contracts demonstrate “great progress in achieving a number of critical learning goals,” suggesting the potential pedagogical value of contracts (174). We argue that faculty and students working together on contracts do not merely complete a transaction but collaborate on a “shared journey,” not unlike classes focused on “pursuing hard questions in a conversational exchange about difficult texts and concepts” (Badenhausen 8). Since tutorial-based

contracts depend upon highly interactive relationships between instructor and student, they share less with independent study, as Badenhausen suggests (15), than with the discussion-based seminars that he places at the heart of the honors curriculum.

In these counterpoints to Badenhausen's challenging characterization of contracts, we have begun to address his first concern, shared by many, that contracts are often perceived as a primarily administrative solution (Lyon 23). Contracts are too frequently executed sloppily and "employed for the wrong reasons or without clear intention" as "a crutch for under-resourced programs," (Badenhausen 5). The idea of contracts as an administrative solution seems to have limited their potential as pedagogical innovations. Conversely, as Badenhausen also notes, "When used properly, honors contracts can be wonderful mechanisms to facilitate creative learning opportunities for students . . ." (5). Proper use, of course, involves guidelines, oversight, and learning outcomes, as Badenhausen indicates (13). For effective contracts, we present our outcomes assessment and oversight as a response to Badenhausen's fourth point about assessment and rigor (5, 11–12). In addition, one part of our contract template addresses Badenhausen's third concern about a loss of honors learning community through the contract process (5, 10–11).

Our program's multi-year overhaul of contracts began in 2010 with in-depth interviews of our students about contracts; we found that most of them disparaged contracts as busy work (Whitebread, Myers, and Peruzzi). Specific issues that came out of these interviews with honors students about contracts resembled some of Bolch's findings at Texas Tech University ("Contracting in Honors"): lack of professor follow-through and incomplete contracts, meaning that the student finished the course but not the honors work. We sought to develop a system by which we could deliver on the pedagogical potential of contracts.

Our improved and still evolving contract practices emerged from two overarching goals: 1) allowing students to conduct meaningful work with an instructor as guide and mentor, and 2) cultivating non-cognitive skills and habits conducive to academic and professional success. Beginning with these two goals, we first

decided on learning outcomes as a best practice (Astin and Antonio 41), aligning them with program and university learning outcomes as another best practice (Astin and Antonio ix). Six Gallaudet honors contract outcomes nest within our program outcomes, which in turn largely align with university outcomes. (See Table 1.)

Table 1 shows that, relative to university outcomes, the honors program and honors contract outcomes emphasize the broader, deeper, and more complex learning that characterizes honors education. The only university outcome the honors program does not assess concerns identity and culture because this outcome forms the core of the university's mission; in keeping with the philosophy of honors as counterpoint to the institution's prevailing academic practices, mission, or focus, the honors program emphasizes other outcomes that still remain aligned with university outcomes.

These outcomes guided the creation of a structure for contracts. The contract template ties into the contract outcomes in three key ways:

- Topic, plan of work, and end-product: outcomes 2 and 3;
- Regular day and meeting time: outcomes 1, 4, and 5;
- “Give back” to peers in class or in discussion with honors peers: outcome 6.

As extensions of non-honors classes, the contracts at Gallaudet expand on a stand-alone honors curriculum in making possible honors-level exploration and questioning in a range of research disciplines. In any non-honors three- or four-credit course, contracting honors students take on about a credit's worth of honors-level work, along with regular meetings with the instructor-as-mentor and possibly some leadership in the non-honors course. A contract turns the whole course into honors credits as long as the student earns a B or higher. For their part, faculty include this work in their personnel action requests; more and more departments explicitly recognize honors contracts as well as honors capstones for merit, promotion, and tenure awards. Two examples of such outcome alignment integrated with examples from contracts and the contract template may illuminate these practices.

**TABLE 1. GALLAUDET UNIVERSITY'S ALIGNED LEARNING OUTCOMES**

	Gallaudet University Outcomes	GU Honors Program Outcomes	GU Honors Contract Outcomes
<b>Language and Communication</b>	Students will use American Sign Language (ASL) and written English to communicate effectively with diverse audiences, for a variety of purposes, and in a variety of settings.	Honors students will excel in applying conventions of academic and professional discourse.	<b>1</b> Students will demonstrate an ability to maintain professional, timely, and effective in-person, face-to-face, virtual, and email communications with the course instructor.
<b>Critical Thinking</b>	Students will summarize, synthesize, and critically analyze ideas from multiple sources in order to draw well-supported conclusions and solve problems.	Honors students will learn to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate multiple perspectives and facts, ideas, and interpretations from various sources—particularly academic and professional sources—at an advanced undergraduate level.	<b>2</b> Students will complete a project that develops intellectual standards and traits applied to the elements* of any discipline in which they are working. * These elements include point of view, information, purpose, interpretation and inference, key questions, assumptions, essential concepts, implications and consequences. (See Paul and Elder.)
<b>Knowledge and Inquiry</b>	Students will apply knowledge, modes of inquiry, and technological competence from a variety of disciplines in order to understand human experience and the natural world.	Honors students will discuss and apply modes of inquiry of humanities, fine arts, social sciences, and natural sciences, including interdisciplinary contexts, using entry-level professional or graduate school practices.	<b>3</b> Students will demonstrate an ability to comprehend and discuss specifics concerning methodological analysis, argument structure, or other aspects of constructing knowledge in a discipline.

<p><b>Ethics and Social Responsibility</b></p>	<p>Students will make reasoned ethical judgments, showing awareness of multiple value systems and taking responsibility for the consequences of their actions. They will apply these judgments, using collaboration and leadership skills, to promote social justice in their local, national, and global communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Honors students will describe and evaluate the perspectives of diverse groups.</li> <li>• Honors students will value and participate in civic-minded service as a way to improve society.</li> <li>• Honors students will develop dispositions and abilities conducive to strong cognitive skills.</li> <li>• Honors students will demonstrate professional behavior consistent with expectations of graduate schools or professional employers.</li> </ul>	<p>4 Students will demonstrate an ability to review their own work and make substantial improvements beyond instructor feedback.</p> <p>5 Students will demonstrate an ability to conduct productive, ongoing meetings with the course instructor.</p> <p>6 Students will use their contract learning and individual attention from the professor to enrich the learning of classmates or present to honors peers.</p>
<p><b>Identity and Culture</b></p>	<p>Students will understand themselves, complex social identities, including deaf identities, and the interrelations within and among diverse cultures and groups.</p>		

The institutional outcome called knowledge and inquiry, for example, aligns with a broad goal of disciplinary competence: the honors program increases disciplinary knowledge with more advanced application by tying contract work to some basic entry-level professional or graduate school disciplinary practices. Students eventually deepen this disciplinary knowledge in their capstone projects. Contracts thus become a tutorial training ground for gradually increasing disciplinary competence. The first part of the contract template begins this work by asking for a description of the topic and incremental work that will lead to a specified final product. The description must distinguish the honors-level content from the rest of the course and either specify any relation to capstone preparation or provide another reason for the choice of focus, thus marking the start of a professional trajectory. Students usually provide a first draft of these contract proposals and then revise based on the instructor's and director's input, particularly with specific suggestions for steps in the work process. One example of a contract that prepared a student for capstone work at Gallaudet involved the acquisition of advanced statistical skills for a capstone in population genetics, with the short-term end project of a mini-application of the statistical skill as well as a comparison of results using the skills learned in a course and the more advanced skill learned in the contract. Another has been completing a literature review designed to narrow the focus for a capstone, with an end product of an annotated bibliography or a reflection on the development of a specific capstone topic. The contract's topic and end product determine the specific iterative, incremental work included in the contract description. With an annotated bibliography, for example, a student might begin by developing a set of questions to review relevant literature, then read two research articles a week, and keep a journal of evolving understanding that the student brings to meetings with the instructor for discussion and advice. These examples illustrate our cultivation of contracts as one way to prepare students for capstone work in a thoughtful and organized way, whether in STEM, humanities, professional, or arts disciplines, although not all contracts must do so. Students may

pursue other areas of interest related to the course in which they are creating a contract.

Other examples of contract topics that might lead toward a capstone include writing a short story inspired by a philosophical idea, analyzing the nature of different kinds of influences cited by a novelist, designing a theater set and lighting, translating a cook-book written in a foreign language, creating a survey and applying for IRB approval, and adapting scholarly knowledge for student newspaper articles. If students discover through a contract that they want to change direction for a capstone, we tell them it is better to find out early through a contract than later in the capstone process, when changes become more difficult, if not impossible. Most important, as these examples of contract work suggest, the possibilities for exploration are endless. To emphasize this point, we repeat this mantra to students: it's not the kind of work, but the level of work.

Contracts for general studies and lower-level courses, usually begun in an honors student's sophomore year at Gallaudet, are designed to establish the process of mentoring and independent research early. Some students add contracts if they want to develop specialized skills beyond the scope of the course, such as mastering advanced design software in an introductory graphic design course. In addition, because many honors students take introductory science courses in their first year to meet all their science requirements within four years, we allow them to expand upon these courses with honors contracts. For these introductory and lower-division courses, instructors typically take a more hands-on approach to contract design. Such contracts might involve a more complex lab. In an introductory biology class for majors, for example, a regular lab on plant growth might involve selecting a hormone and testing its effects in different concentrations on seed germination, yielding results that students could show on a simple graph with one independent variable. Honors students might deepen this work by testing two independent variables, such as two hormones or one hormone under different light conditions. They could analyze the results of their experimental design with an analysis of variance

(ANOVA), and their lab report would demonstrate an understanding of how to interpret the impact of two or more independent variables. Such introductory contracts do not typically relate to a capstone, but they offer an important opportunity to introduce and develop critical-thinking skills and basic disciplinary conventions. They also build confidence and independence vital to success in upper-division honors courses and the capstone. To ensure these benefits and promote a supportive honors peer community, we encourage students to develop multi-student contracts in these lower-division courses.

Contracts at Gallaudet University also focus on the non-cognitive collaborative and leadership skills that support the university's social responsibility and ethics outcome. Honors aligns two specific contract learning outcomes with this university concern: 1) developing dispositions and abilities conducive to strong cognitive skills, and 2) demonstrating professional behavior consistent with graduate school or employment. Because these skills are also critical to capstone success, three contract outcomes prepare students for capstones by aligning with program and university outcomes: revising work (incremental development) beyond professorial comments; initiating and maintaining professional communication with the instructor; and regularly meeting with the instructor (at least biweekly although some choose weekly meetings of shorter duration than the biweekly meetings, which vary between 30 to 50 minutes). In coming prepared to meetings and following the plan of work, students develop independence and fortify intrinsic motivation. In communications and quality of work, students practice professionalism. In projects that involve correcting initial understanding or revising hypotheses by following up with more sources and making new connections, students begin to experience what long-term projects will be like in capstone work, graduate school, and the professional world.

The regular meetings and communications are where the tutorial or mentoring relationship fully develops. Through this mentoring, students learn not only about a subject or skill but also about professional or disciplinary norms and conventions. Regular

meetings with the instructor foster the skill of dialogic learning valued in honors education and by students today (Bedetti 110); in the case of contracts, that dialogue is between instructor and student or with a small group of honors students rather than in a class discussion. In particular, instructors often model or guide contract students in the critical evaluation and judgment necessary to make an original contribution in one's field, starting with the independent work of capstones. Our students explain why they value one-on-one meetings with their instructors by pointing to faculty's direct intervention in the process of working through ideas or skills, an intervention that deepens understanding and increases memory for students (Whitebread and Myers). Furthermore, students have commented that coming to meetings with prepared questions to initiate discussion increases their confidence in future conversations where they explain capstone ideas and invite faculty to serve on their committees. At Gallaudet, we have found that a number of deaf students harbor insecurities or suffer from imposter phenomenon (Mathwig and Lord), and many of these students combine academic preparedness in some areas with educational gaps in others. For these students, the one-on-one attention of contracts becomes a means of equity, inclusion, and access to honors achievement, as Dotter and Hageman describe in other contexts and in greater depth in the next two chapters.

The honors program's sixth and final outcome for all contracts develops leadership and responsibility through what we call "Give Back." Honors students may choose to tutor other students in the class, prepare study materials, host a film discussion, or present to classmates what they have learned through their contract work, among other activities. Although presenting to non-honors classmates had become the default activity, students complained in our spring 2018 focus group that classmates were either uninterested or underprepared to engage the presenters with questions and comments. Some contract students said that they preferred the opportunity to present their work to fellow honors students and thus to engage in more thoughtful cross-disciplinary discussion. In the coming year, the honors program will therefore institute the

choice to “Give Back” by either sharing ideas and outcomes with non-honors peers in the contracted course or presenting to fellow honors students at a special end-of-semester honors community event. In connecting contract learning to the shared experiences of an honors community, contracts can reinforce rather than pose a threat to that community, addressing a third area of concern raised by Badenhausen (5, 10–11) and mentioned by Bahls (178).

Oversight ensures the quality of the work students carry out in their contracts. We are involved in the drafting and approval of contracts at the beginning as well as at a mid-point check-in and in an end-of-semester assessment for both instructors and students. Besides in-person or online meetings with students at these three points, a handbook provides a written reference for all parts of the contract. After the initial approval of a contract, the director initiates the electronic contract documentation that is shared automatically with the registrar to record an honors designation on a student’s transcript. At midterm, we check grades in contracted courses and briefly connect with students to verify that they are meeting regularly with the professor, finding the contract worthwhile, and coming reasonably close to where they expected to be in their work at that point. This check-in gives us a chance to intervene early if the contract is not going as planned or if the tutorial relationship has broken down. To intervene, we might devise strategies to get the student back on track or contact the instructor directly. Knowing the terms and standards of contracts, faculty also proactively alert the director along with the student about possible barriers to successful contract completion. At the end of the semester, we send to both instructor and student an electronic assessment link. (See the Appendix.) Once the subject selects the appropriate role of either instructor or student, the assessment continues with the instructions and questions for that role.

Instructors use a Likert rating scale to evaluate the extent to which students have met each of the honors program’s six learning outcomes, an assessment that determines whether a student earns honors credit. The first three outcomes rely heavily on instructor judgment while the final three are more direct measures of student

behaviors. In addition, professors can provide more nuanced evaluations in written comments. Calling for judgment on the quality and depth of learning in the field or discipline, the assessment puts authority in the instructor's hands, even as it accommodates institutional pressure to provide quantifiable assessment. At the same time, we recognize that students gain from assessing themselves and their experience with the instructor. With great appreciation, we credit Lucy Morrison for this idea, which we have added with modifications to our contract practices. In addition to rating their own performance on the six outcomes, students answer key questions evaluating the instructor, including: "Did the professor follow through on the weekly or biweekly meetings?" and "Was the professor invested in and engaged with your contract work?" While the student evaluation does not determine honors credit, it does offer a valuable educational opportunity for students to reflect on the content and management of their contract learning. This conscious reflection deepens engagement by keeping the student at the center of a learner-directed environment.

To earn honors credit, students must meet minimum standards, which the honors program established after two years of collecting assessment data and looking at the work done for each rating: no instructor ratings of 1, no more than two ratings of 2, and all other ratings between 3–5. We follow up if a student does not earn minimum ratings or if the student and instructor ratings diverge widely. For contracts not earning minimum scores, the honors director consults with the instructor for more information on the unacceptable ratings and then meets with the student in the director's appropriate advisory role to explain this information and determine what the student learned from the failed contract. To support busy faculty in these cases, the director also notifies the registrar to remove the honors contract credit from the course. Very few of our contracts fail, however, because of the detailed work involved in proposing and vetting contracts, mid-term check-ins, monitored outcomes-based assessments, and early faculty communication with the director about concerns.

Much like the early debates between scholars of interdisciplinary studies, such as Thomas C. Benson's 1982 critique and William H. Newell's 1983 response, the controversy surrounding honors contracts has sparked interest in their pedagogical value and the development of best practices for ensuring compelling, rigorous, and beneficial learning. Early criticism of honors contracts echoes Benson's critique of interdisciplinary courses, which he calls "pedagogically doubtful," "characteristically shallow," detrimental to "disciplinary competence," and costly. Yet, thanks to intrepid interdisciplinary leaders like Newell, Julie Klein Thompson, and others, scholars have developed precise definitions of interdisciplinarity and best practices for interdisciplinary courses, allowing such courses to become a cornerstone of honors education as well as other educational spheres. We anticipate a similar dynamic characterizing an evolving reputation of contracts. Following best practices, contracts typify personalized, mentored learning that is structured to lead students toward increasing intellectual independence; they therefore embody the latest evolution of tutorials in honors education. As such, contracts deserve a central place in honors education today.

As a valued part of honors education, tutorial-based contracts can be seen as a special approach used in various modes of learning—research and creative scholarship, breadth and enduring questions, service learning and leadership, experiential learning, and learning communities—and can therefore similarly result in the "broader, deeper, and more complex learning-centered and learner-directed experiences" with which the NCHC defines honors education ("Definition"). In addition, the measurable skills outlined in this definition—"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"—might productively expand to include the initiative and independence cultivated especially well in tutorially based contracts.

The NCHC's "Definition of Honors Education" is not the only document needing revision to account for the value of honors contracts. As NCHC moves to consider revising its "Basic

Characteristics” to include a focus on inclusion, diversity, equity, access, and social justice, the individual attention of a contract experience may be essential in the development of these attributes for first-generation, racial and ethnic minority, differently abled, and other underrepresented students in honors education who can be empowered to resist systems of privilege that cultivate powerlessness. Badenhausen might find this assertion surprising because of his assumption that students must self-advocate for contracts and thus participate in a system biased toward privileged students who comfortably initiate such learning opportunities (15–16). As he rightly suggests, honors educators need to provide intentional contract mentoring and advising to counter such a stacked deck. Once underway, however, the contract experience can benefit such students, especially in that the instructor can tailor comments to address the non-cognitive as well as cognitive needs of a student in one-on-one meetings, an effective way to build self-confidence and self-advocacy. Along with the benefits already laid out in this chapter, this noteworthy gain is another reason to include contracts in the “Basic Characteristics,” possibly in this statement (insertions bracketed): “The honors curriculum, established in harmony with the mission statement, meets the needs of the students in the program and features special courses, seminars, colloquia, experiential learning opportunities, undergraduate research opportunities, [contracts and tutorials,] or other independent-study options.”

While best practices for contracts are forming, continued adaptations will keep contracts attractive to the learning needs of future honors students, especially as tensions between practical training and liberal education continue and as emerging large-scale social changes pressure higher education to change in ways not yet imagined. Higher education consultant L. Dee Fink contends that changes from an industrial age to an information age are encouraging more individualized learning among other forms of learning honors education has long cherished, such as active construction of knowledge rather than memorizing, collaboration rather than competition, self-directed rather than instructor-directed learning, personal rather than transactional relationships among students and between faculty and students, and the cultivation of lifelong

rather than short-term learning (12–22). Playing a promising role in this information age, contracts exemplify honors education when ongoing faculty guidance supports student-chosen learning and when programs establish effective oversight and assessment based on aligned institutional, program or college, and contract learning outcomes.

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## APPENDIX

## Gallaudet University Honors Contract Assessment

*Please fill out the demographic information below. Once you've completed this form, you will be automatically directed to the evaluation appropriate for your role. Students will be directed to the self-evaluation form, and faculty will be directed to the instructor form. Please direct any questions or concerns to [honors@gallaudet.edu](mailto:honors@gallaudet.edu).*

What course was the contract in? (i.e., GSR 240) \_\_\_\_\_

Semester Year of Contract (i.e., Fall 2016) \_\_\_\_\_

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

Faculty Name \_\_\_\_\_

Your Role (select one)

- Student
- Faculty/Instructor

### Student Self-Evaluation

*Please answer the following questions on your honors contract. Your answers will help us understand your experience in the contract and develop a more meaningful contract experience for your peers. Your answers will not adversely affect your "H" credit for this course.*

How much did you invest in making the contract a meaningful project for you?

- A Lot
- A Fair Amount
- Some
- Not Enough
- None

Please explain your answer above. \_\_\_\_\_

Did you and your faculty member meet regularly as scheduled?

- Yes
- No

Please explain your answer above. \_\_\_\_\_

We emphasize professionalism in contracts. How professional do you consider your behavior to be?

- Highly Professional
- Moderately Professional
- Somewhat Professional
- Slightly Professional
- Minimally Professional

Please explain your answer above (and provide examples of professional behaviors).

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Did you learn advanced knowledge or skills?

- Yes
- No

If yes, what knowledge or skills did you learn? \_\_\_\_\_

Do they connect with your capstone? \_\_\_\_\_

If so, how? \_\_\_\_\_

Students are expected to give back to the community. How valuable was this component of your contract? Please explain. \_\_\_\_\_

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Faculty are key partners in making contracts successful. How likely are you to recommend your instructor for future contracts?

- Extremely Likely
- Somewhat Likely
- Neither Likely nor Unlikely
- Somewhat Unlikely
- Extremely Unlikely

Please explain your answer above. \_\_\_\_\_

Please provide any additional thoughts, comments, or feedback on honors contracts. \_\_\_\_\_

### Faculty Evaluation

*Please evaluate the student's performance in the honors contract.*

The student has successfully demonstrated a deepened knowledge of the discipline(s)/field(s) through his/her project.

- Far Exceeds Expectations
- Exceeds Expectations
- Equals Expectations
- Short of Expectations
- Far Short of Expectations

The student has completed substantial improvements to the project between receiving the instructor's feedback and submitting the final project.

- Far Exceeds Expectations
- Exceeds Expectations
- Equals Expectations
- Short of Expectations
- Far Short of Expectations

The student's project demonstrates an ability to manipulate detail and master nuance using discipline-specific scholarship.

- Far Exceeds Expectations
- Exceeds Expectations
- Equals Expectations
- Short of Expectations
- Far Short of Expectations

The student reliably maintained professional email communication with the course instructor throughout the semester.

- Far Exceeds Expectations
- Exceeds Expectations
- Equals Expectations

- Short of Expectations
- Far Short of Expectations

The student attended and was prepared for productive, professional ongoing meetings, usually biweekly, with the instructor.

- Far Exceeds Expectations
- Exceeds Expectations
- Equals Expectations
- Short of Expectations
- Far Short of Expectations

The student enriched the learning of classmates through a well-crafted presentation or other contribution.

- Far Exceeds Expectations
- Exceeds Expectations
- Equals Expectations
- Short of Expectations
- Far Short of Expectations

In your conversations with the student, he/she demonstrates an understanding of and investment in the civic obligation to give back to the community (via a presentation or other contribution) because of the added opportunities to learn the student has accepted.

- Far Exceeds Expectations
- Exceeds Expectations
- Equals Expectations
- Short of Expectations
- Far Short of Expectations

How satisfied are you with your leadership in the contract?

- Very Satisfied
- Moderately Satisfied
- Neither Satisfied nor Unsatisfied

Slightly Unsatisfied

Very Unsatisfied

Please provide any general comments that will help us better understand the ratings you gave. Written comments not only help us understand ratings but also intervene effectively in our advising of honors students.

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## CHAPTER THREE

# Honors Contracts: Empowering Students and Fostering Autonomy in Honors Education

ANNE DOTTER  
UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

Although culturally mandated as a gateway to professional opportunities and wealth, college degrees are the prerogative of only half of the United States population, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (Musu-Gillette et al. v). Even those who attend college do not always acquire the training they need to achieve their goals: the lack of written communication or analytical skills directly impacts retention and completion, particularly of students underprepared for college. The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) website features a “Diversity and Inclusion Statement” under its “Definition of Honors Education,” and the organization has placed equity and inclusion at the heart of its current strategic plan. In this chapter, I argue that honors contracts offer honors educators a way to “promote the inclusion and success

of academically motivated and high-potential learners from all communities, understanding that each of us holds varied, intersectional identities” (“Diversity and Inclusion Statement”). The work of the University Honors Program (UHP) at the University of Kansas (KU) shows that honors contracts act as far more than stopgaps to address honors course shortages: they can facilitate access to honors, increase completion, democratize key aspects of the honors experience, provide students with structured avenues for building relationships with faculty members, and empower students to own their educational experiences.

As Richard Badenhausen suggests, despite their commonality across honors education, contracts have rarely been the focus of serious scholarship and responsible pedagogical debate. When they are mentioned, authors typically describe them as “viable” (Bolch 57) but not preferable because they put “an unnecessary burden on both students [. . .] and faculty” (Wilson 150), even as they fail to create an honors-exclusive classroom environment (Gee and Bleming 178). The article that most clearly describes the pedagogical benefits of contracts for both students and faculty appeared not in an NCHC publication, but in the journal *English Education*. In “Honoring All Learners: The Case for Embedded Honors in Heterogeneous English Language Arts Classrooms,” David Nurenberg articulates the value of adjusting assignments to students’ preparedness in heterogeneous English language arts classrooms. Nurenberg defines honors-embedded pedagogy as “a product that shows that a student delved more deeply into methodology, structure and/or theory; addressed more sophisticated questions; and satisfied more rigorous standards. [. . .] The content is either broader in scope or deeper in examination than in a comparable assignment” (65). He concludes that differentiated instruction serves all students equally and indiscriminately.

The characteristics of such honors-embedded learning echo the best practices recommended in honors teaching and learning, as described in Fuiks and Clark’s *Teaching and Learning in Honors*: connecting in-class learning with the world; applying self-directed learning approaches to assignments; engaging in metacognition,

critical thinking, and analysis; teaching one's peers; and participating in community-engaged learning. Done well, honors-embedded experiences such as honors contracts appear to be fruitful both for the students challenged at a higher level and the peers who benefit from interactions with stronger readers and writers. Fostering autonomy for all students in honors regardless of major, intersected identities, or status is the goal at KU, as elsewhere in honors education; an intentional practice of honors contracts is one of the means that the UHP has adopted to meet that goal. Patrick Bahls's recent essay in the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* values intentional honors contracts that create the "opportunity for students' self-guided intellectual growth" (175). In practice at KU, the initiative to create high-quality honors contracts has been inclusive in many more ways than initially anticipated.

The KU Honors Program supports 1,600 total students, and it admits into honors about 10% of every first-year incoming class at the institution. The vast majority of the students in the program are admitted to the UHP as first-year, first-time-enrolling students. The program has also always accepted transfer students, including both current KU students who are admitted during their first or second year and students transferring to KU from another institution. While the number of transfer students has increased over the past five years, that number remains relatively small (39 transfer students were accepted in fall 2017, a record number thus far). Transfer students balance the UHP's attrition rate and thus help to maintain the total number of honors students at KU. More significantly, during the past five years, the acceptance rate for underrepresented minority (URM) students has increased: while only 9.5% of students invited to join the honors program came from underrepresented groups before 2013, URM students represented 23.2% of invitations to honors in spring 2018. Despite the program's best efforts, however, the majority of admitted URM honors students do not ultimately matriculate on our campus. The UHP remains well below KU's institutional 12.27% of undergraduate students from underrepresented groups, with a mere 8.5%. A majority-white institution (official records show KU's student body

to be 77.4% white), KU boasts of more regional than ethnic or racial diversity. Accordingly, the UHP serves mostly Kansans, particularly from the Kansas City metropolitan area, as well as from small communities across Kansas; a recent university-wide push to increase the recruitment of out-of-state students led to a growing number of non-Kansans as well.

The honors curriculum at KU requires students to complete a first-year seminar, six courses totaling at least eighteen credit hours, and four enhanced learning experiences, representing exactly 15% of a student's KU degree (minimum 120 credit hours) and thus aligning (if barely) with the NCHC's "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program." To allow students to meet these requirements, the UHP offers 100 different honors courses every semester, most of which satisfy general education requirements and are delivered by departments in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Students may also satisfy honors course requirements by completing graduate coursework (700-level or above), up to two less commonly taught language courses, or up to two honors course contracts. Contracts are designed for 300-level (or above) courses that do not have an honors equivalent. Students earn as many honors credits as the contracted class is worth, with no requirement to enroll in supplementary hours.

Like many other honors programs and colleges, the UHP at KU has struggled to respond adequately to the increase in AP/college credits in conjunction, in our case, with an institutional decrease in general education requirements. In fall 2013, the UHP welcomed an incoming honors class of 400, an increase from 270 first-year students in fall 2012. Since then, the program has maintained that class size: 399 first-year students were admitted in fall 2019. This sustained growth called for some important changes that continue to be crucial today, including the introduction of digital advising tools to track student progress and the addition of honors courses to accommodate increased enrollment. During this early period of honors growth, KU also launched a new set of core requirements, reducing general education credits by 35 hours and transforming a broad liberal arts and sciences curriculum into a more skills-based

core of six main areas: critical thinking, oral and written communication, diversity, ethics, breadth of understanding, and depth of learning. Since the UHP had always met general education requirements with honors courses, we began restructuring to meet our expanded student body's needs.

A year later, in the wake of events in Ferguson in the summer of 2014, college campuses around the nation, starting with the University of Missouri, began to acknowledge and respond to student concerns about race and inclusion. At KU, two students, Elika and Isabella (all students' names have been changed to respect their privacy), broached the topic of honors inclusivity and equity with UHP staff, drawing attention to both our reputation on campus as an elitist unit and our responsibility to model equitability and inclusivity for KU students, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sex, national origin, ability, or sexual orientation. In response, UHP staff members offered training sessions to instructors to improve their cultural competency; the program also encouraged all faculty teaching honors courses to include a diversity statement in their syllabi and offered models of such statements.

Other curricular initiatives included an effort to make honors contracts as visible and inclusive as possible by engaging students in personalized conversations about their benefits. The vast majority of KU honors students talk with a UHP advisor about contracts to ensure that they understand the process well and are aware of their options. These meetings allow students to rehearse future conversations with faculty in a safe environment, and they enable advisors to set clear UHP expectations for contracts and to equip students with the necessary language to meet those expectations, an advantage Edgington explores more fully in Chapter Ten. Such contract advising has been particularly beneficial to KU honors students in majors like music and engineering, with notoriously challenging curricula; rather than losing these students to majors with many requirements, we show them how honors contract work fits into their academic requirements and individual goals. Our honors advisors are in the best position to gauge a student's understanding of faculty and institutional expectations, often referred to as the

“invisible syllabus,” and to explain and adapt each conversation to an individual student’s needs (Harris and Bensimon 80).

Honors began to make contracts more visible and accessible to all students in fall 2013. By fall 2014, we were encouraging honors students to take ownership of their own educations, making good use of honors contracts as well as other avenues for empowerment. KU offers two kinds of honors contracts: students or faculty can initiate contracts to enhance student learning in a non-honors course. In every case, contracts must meet a minimum of three learning outcomes focused on the development of specific skills (communication, research, analytical ability) to be approved by the honors program. Selected outcomes differ depending on fields of study; in STEM fields, for example, most students opt for research projects that demand creative or critical thought about course material by engaging them with more complex hypotheses and experiments, databases, or software than they would otherwise encounter in class. The student-initiated contract at KU is thus similar to contracts at many other institutions, as our submission form illustrates (see Appendix A): students interested in furthering their understanding of specific course material can earn honors credit in non-honors courses.

Collective course contracts were originally developed as a recruiting tool for faculty: from 2014 through spring 2017, UHP staff offered their support to individual faculty to develop collective contracts if their honors student enrollment exceeded seven (in any course, including, on occasion, an introductory course without an honors equivalent). If traditional honors contracts might seem to be a privilege reserved for an elite group of entitled students, as Badenhausen points out in his critique, collective contracts include students who may not be prepared to advocate for themselves in a collaborative project. It soon became evident to UHP administrators that collective contracts were far more than a mechanism to recruit faculty; they were a way to support honors students across a range of majors and schools. This initiative has been particularly successful in KU’s professional schools: the first collective contract was offered by Professor Douglas Ward in the School of Journalism

in a course entitled “Infomania.” An ongoing (as of fall 2019), creative approach to a required course, this group contract created a clear pathway for honors students through journalism requirements; it also promoted inclusivity of all majors in honors. It has also been particularly productive in the School of Engineering, where close to half of our students are earning degrees, but where few departments had offered honors courses until this initiative. Collective contracts have led to the creation of a number of collaborative engineering experiences for our honors students.

Collective contracts benefit honors students in many ways; it has been a priority for the UHP at KU to ensure that they also benefit faculty. The stated aim of contracts is to strengthen a student’s teamwork, creativity, research, leadership, oral communication (teaching or tutoring), and pre-professional skills, all while furthering the students’ learning in the discipline. (See Appendix B.) Often, however, contracts represent an added and uncompensated burden on faculty at KU. In recognition of this fact, the UHP has proposed a zero-credit-hour add-on course to mark an honors contract on student transcripts and to ensure an official record of directed honors contracts for faculty. Working closely in 2018 with our student enrollment management office and our registrar, we developed a fully integrated tracking system that allows for both recognition of faculty efforts and an upgrade to honors student transcripts, using institutionally available tools in the Perceptive Content system (formerly known as ImageNow).

But contracts also benefit faculty who engage fully with their students in this work. UHP administration has encouraged faculty to experiment with assignments that they may have never had the opportunity to integrate into their courses. For example, honors students in the aforementioned Infomania course became team leaders in charge of gathering, synthesizing, and presenting information in the most compelling way possible. Empowered honors students can help faculty in a number of ways: students engaging in honors contracts have assisted faculty by delivering information to the class, leading discussion, or supporting their peers in problem solving. One professor in the School of Music, for example, has asked his

contract students to contribute lesson plans that introduce different musical instruments to particular age ranges, thereby building a toolbox that he has then used regularly in his music teaching. The UHP's goal in discussing contracts with both students and faculty is to communicate that this work presents opportunities for creativity. Whether contracts allow honors-engaged work in a professional school without the enrollment to justify a standing honors course or to expand the range of content in other academic fields, they challenge students and faculty to consider ways in which they can collaborate productively and fruitfully.

Visibility of the UHP has increased because honors staff have worked closely with faculty to develop collective honors contracts. This process teaches faculty about the UHP and gives them a better understanding of honors opportunities for both their students and themselves. (Limited funds are available to support local experiences, for instance.) As of fall 2019, a number of faculty were in the habit of offering this opportunity to honors students instead of waiting to receive lists of eligible students from the UHP. Adding a prominent page of information about contracts to the UHP website also broadened and increased communication about the value of honors contracts. Because past honors administrations at KU avoided the topic of contracts, the addition of this webpage feature has been a rather drastic change. Between January 2016 and June 2019, the honors contract page was visited 2,815 times by unique viewers, making it one of the top 35 most visited of the roughly 200 pages on the honors website. Because of more intentional advising, traffic increased in spring 2018; by fall 2019, the contract page was the 25th most visited on the UHP website. The program also incorporated specific information about contracts into both orientation welcome messaging for new honors students and each subsequent stage of honors advising: students in honors consistently hear that they have four different options, one of which is the honors contract, to complete honors course requirements.

This intentional communication about honors contracts has led to a radical increase in the number of students engaged in them, from the mere eight whose work was recorded before 2013

to the 408 who submitted contract work between fall 2013 and early spring 2018. Of these 408 students, 111 engaged in collective contracts, and 297 contracted individually. Honors contracts are most popular in the School of Music (57 since 2013). Other professional schools report similarly high numbers: students in the School of Journalism (42), the School of Engineering (38), and the School of Architecture and Design (25) all take advantage of the contract option. Most other contracts are spread across disciplines in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The vast majority of students (222) developed only one honors contract during their time at KU, 50 students contracted in two courses, and the remaining 25 students contracted three or four times. All of the students who developed more than two honors contracts were majoring in the Schools of Engineering, Music, or Architecture and Design.

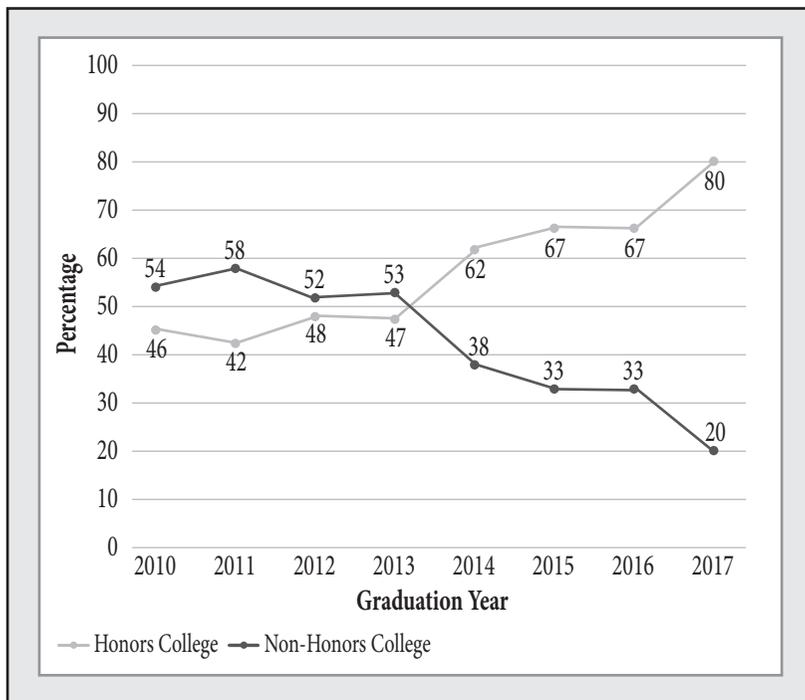
During the five years that the UHP has actively promoted contracts, the program has experienced a 13% increase in student completion of all honors requirements. Honors contracts are not solely responsible for this increase. While changes to advising strategy, for example, have also had an impact on completion, the number of honors contracts listed by students as a means to satisfy honors program requirements increased substantially over this period. In 2013, 4% of students submitting honors exit surveys indicated that they completed course contracts to fulfill honors requirements; in 2017, 16% of students completing their honors requirements employed contracts. This increase was gradual with a clear upward trend from 4% (2013) to 6% (2014) to 9% (2015) to 14% (2016) to 16% (2017); in other words, the average number of honors contracts between 2013 and 2017 increased from 7 to 45 per term.

In parallel, the UHP's completion numbers grew from 161 to 277 between 2013 and 2017. The number of transfer students completing all honors requirements has also increased by 33% since 2013, with a corresponding 33% decrease in the number of transfer students who chose not to complete honors requirements. (See Figure 1.) Forty of the 67 respondents to the survey described below claimed that without the option of honors contracts, they would not have been able to complete their degrees with honors. Within this

group, a majority of students reported that there were not enough upper-division honors courses available in their majors. Twenty-nine students suggested that curricular constraints and lack of time made contracts essential to their graduation with honors.

The UHP staff was generally aware that the intentional use of honors contracts could raise graduation rates, but the program had never made a systematic attempt to understand the specific benefits of contracts for many honors students. To that end, in spring 2018, the UHP surveyed all students who completed an honors contract over the past five years as part of a broader series of surveys meant to evaluate student satisfaction with all UHP programming. Of the 408 students who completed honors contracts during this five-year period, 167 were still active KU students in good standing with the UHP at the time of the survey's distribution. Of the 408, 275 were women, and 32 identified with a non-white ethnic and/or racial identity, including Hispanic, African American, and Asian

**FIGURE 1. CURRENT/TRANSFER COMPLETION 2010–2017**



American. These 408 students represent a cross-section of the honors student body, from first-year students to seniors. Only 67 of these 408 students (16.5%) chose to respond to the anonymous survey sent in early March 2018. Due to invalid email addresses for many graduated students, however, the survey response rate was actually closer to 30% of those who received the survey, a statistically significant number. Of the 67 respondents, 36 majored or were majoring in professional schools, and 31 earned degrees in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. A vast majority of contracts (42) were developed by students in their field of study. In other cases, students sought to enhance learning in a general education course above the 300 level. A few contracts did not serve to complete honors requirements; in these cases, students were simply interested in furthering their understanding of a particular course's material, and the contract offered them just the support and structure they needed to achieve that goal.

While the survey focused in a controlled fashion on both the constraints and benefits of contracts, the follow-up conversations scheduled with 22 of the respondents sought to broaden programmatic understanding of honors students' contract experiences and to identify whether they perceived contracts as an important part of honors inclusivity. Despite efforts to diversify the respondent pool, all 22 respondents were women. The interviews were partially structured: in all cases, honors staff asked the same five questions to create a consistent data set, although the order of the questions varied, following rather than scripting the natural flow of conversation. I do not believe that this fluid structure influenced student responses in a way that might invalidate the findings described below. The following case studies represent some of the most salient examples from the pool of interview responses.

Mattea, Kosha, and Lucy, our first three case studies, were each introduced to a different collective honors contract by the instructor of an honors-enhanced course. None of them would have taken the steps to engage in a contract on their own had the opportunity not been offered. All of them, however, enjoyed significant unexpected benefits from their experiences. Mattea enjoyed the opportunity to

begin research, critical thinking, and analysis in a field that would eventually become her major. As an openly gay African American woman interested in the field of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, she needed both a structured way of engaging critically with the canonical works presented in many of her classes and a clear understanding that her disruption of that narrative was both encouraged and expected in her future major. Her growing frustration with regular coursework found a productive outlet in the honors-enhanced research project that she designed following the invitation of the instructor in one of her courses. This contract gave Mattea the tools to find her place in a field of study that she did not immediately recognize as a good fit.

Kosha's experience was with a collective honors contract in a course satisfying a requirement for her psychology minor. Kosha acknowledged that she entered into the honors contract for transactional reasons: to earn honors credits necessary for the completion of her degree. The nature of her contract project and the relationship she developed with her faculty mentor, however, led her to join a psychology research lab, an experience seldom available to students outside the major. When asked which skills her honors contract developed, she pointed to three key professional skills for a STEM student: the ability to synthesize knowledge, the capacity to construct a scientific poster, and the confidence to advocate for herself. Kosha's path into complex scientific research is unusual, but the track from honors contract to independent lab work to thesis is often followed by students who need some scaffolding within undergraduate research, in both STEM and other fields. Honors contracts allow students to experience research before their senior capstone course sequence, thus encouraging an increasing number of honors students to complete departmental honors at KU, a kind of scaffolding discussed in more detail in Ticknor and Khan's essay in this volume. At KU, the Department of Philosophy considered making the honors contract a required step toward completion of the honors thesis because contracts allow students to refine analytical skills and thus to enhance the quality of their capstone performance.

Lucy, our third case study, was a civil engineering major who opted for an enhanced honors version of Theater as Performance, a course that met the oral communication general education requirement. Enhancing this course meant attending talks by scholars from various disciplines and analyzing their public communication skills using tools learned in class. This assignment forced Lucy out of her comfort zone by asking her not only to engage habitually in informal conversation with faculty but also to do so on topics well outside her areas of expertise. Fulfilling this contract gave Lucy the skills to advocate for herself and to develop intentional relationships with faculty. As one of only twenty-two female students in her graduating honors engineering cohort of sixty, she noted that the honors contract equipped her with the tools both to assert herself in a masculine environment and to take on future leadership roles in her discipline. In our conversation, Lucy repeatedly connected the close rapport she developed with her contract mentor early in her college career with her ability to advocate for herself in engineering courses later. She became the captain of the competitive steel bridge team and was offered a permanent position after interning with an engineering firm the summer before graduation. Lucy credited the honors contract's gentle push to move beyond her comfort zone with many of her future successes at KU. The contract empowered her to take full ownership of her engineering education and to affirm herself first at KU and then in her profession, a benefit that Hageman explores further in Chapter Four.

While the three case studies above highlight the experience of students engaged in collective honors contracts, the four below focus on individual student-initiated projects. For some students, the decision to pursue an honors contract is financial. For example, as a Spanish major on a pre-medical track who self-finances her education with both work and loans, Megan discovered at the end of one fall semester that she had not budgeted enough to cover tuition for her final semester on campus. While she had planned for all of her major requirements, she forgot her final honors course requirement. Asking her parents for the needed \$1,000 would put additional financial strain on her already burdened family. The

honors contract was the only way for her to complete her degree with University Honors. Another Spanish major, Cecilia, started at a nearby community college. On the basis of her past experience, she fully expected honors contracts to be available. As an incoming junior, she was counting on contracts to enable her to complete her degree with University Honors, a feat she would not otherwise be able to achieve. Although her engagement with honors contracts was originally purely utilitarian, her honors-enhanced assignment launched a successful research project that she then developed the following summer as a McNair Scholar. Like most of the other students described above, Cecilia maximized her engagement in many areas of her education by making good use of the honors contract, thereby taking charge of her KU experience and finding her place at the university more effectively.

For some students, honors contracts offer a means of connecting their various academic interests in thoughtful ways that lead to concrete outcomes. Edith's case illustrates this idea quite clearly: while the requirements for her two areas of emphasis (a major in music performance and a minor in creative writing) did not overlap, they connected in her honors contract, which involved writing and performing lyrics to accompany a friend's original music. Her contract gave her a formal framework for approaching a faculty member, articulating connections between her two disciplines, and earning credit for the work she might otherwise not have had the opportunity to complete. Conversely, Ananda did not need contract credit to finish her degree with honors, but she eagerly took the opportunity to explore legal issues with an honors contract because she was considering the pursuit of a law degree. Ultimately, the focus of the honors contract on specific legal work clarified for her that this professional path was not a good fit. She finished the contract grateful for the chance to adjust her future career plans.

The support that contracts can offer students seems to suggest that they might be an inclusive pedagogical strategy. Indeed, a majority of respondents (36 of these 67) indicated in response to a direct question that the contract experience was "inclusive," although the survey did not ask them to define the term further. Students

repeatedly used the open-response field, however, to describe in more detail the positive contract experiences that led to this feeling of inclusivity. Perhaps most important for respondents was the ability to “foster a relationship” with the professor. Forty-eight students reported not having known the professor before completing their contracts, yet 34 described these faculty as their “mentors.” When prompted to reflect on how this relationship developed, students cited the time spent with the faculty member discussing the contract project itself, as opposed to talking about research in general, for instance. The focused nature of these conversations made the interaction with faculty safe and clear for students: the contract thus worked as an important pathway to mentorship. This is not to minimize the deepening of students’ learning in the course but to emphasize the value to students of developing a mentoring relationship with a professor, a benefit explored in depth by Snyder and Weisberg in Chapter Seven. Even students who elected not to contract within their majors highlighted the value of relationships with faculty whom they otherwise “would not have sought out.” Substantially, 33% of students reported that the faculty who mentored them through their honors contracts would write or had written letters of recommendation for them.

The open-ended and encouraging nature of the follow-up interviews allowed students to share their thoughts and feelings casually and in more detail. This approach led to a number of unexpected findings, including information about students’ financial concerns. Most students acknowledged that because contracts were tied to existing credits already in their schedules, this form of honors work allowed them to 1) stay within the recommended limit of 15 credit hours per semester, 2) manage their time better, and 3) avoid out-of-pocket expenses for courses exceeding their scholarship coverage, a problem that Wyatt addresses in Chapter Nine. These KU honors students were primarily concerned with their potential inability to complete their degrees with honors. Close to half (45%) of the interviewees affirmed that financial constraints shaped their decisions to opt for honors contracts. In a different environment, financial constraints might play an even greater motivating role in

students' decisions to complete honors contracts. It is striking that half of the students interviewed considered the financial benefits of contracts to be important, particularly since the survey alone would not have revealed this view. Attending to such concerns is crucial to honors educators seeking to create an inclusive community for students.

In addition to such financial concerns, honors contracts address key aspects of pedagogical best practices in honors education and do so while fostering inclusion. At KU, all students completing an honors contract between 2013 and 2019 applied self-directed learning approaches to their assignments and taught their peers. The seven case studies above show how our students have also connected in-class learning with the world; engaged in metacognition, critical thinking, and analysis; and participated in community-engaged learning. Interviews with students revealed that the three key learning outcomes of honors contracts at KU are an increased awareness of their own learning process and skills, the development of pre-professional competencies, and the practice of research. In the process of meeting these outcomes, students have become empowered to take ownership of their education and thus to overcome a range of social and structural barriers. Contracts that empower all students to achieve these goals are certainly inclusive, as our survey has suggested they were.

Significantly, the most important take-away from the analysis of the students' feedback was not expressly planned or anticipated. Beyond the various skills they mastered, students frequently credited their honors contracts with a growing sense of responsibility for their own learning, an ability to take the initiative in that learning, and a strong feeling of controlling their own education. Students almost unanimously reported that the contract process "made me feel more empowered as a student" because "it was *my* class." Students also described an enhanced sense of agency in their learning; by developing rapport with one faculty mentor, students felt confident in their ability to do so again, whether or not they did so within the honors contract structure. One student went so far as to say that she was emboldened to advocate for herself and her peers

on campus after completing her contract. The clear pattern in student comments is that contracts allowed them to “create their own honors experience,” regardless of discipline, and that this creative educational act added personal and professional value for them.

Students credited the structure of the honors contract, in particular, with their growing sense of autonomy. Developing student autonomy is an important outcome of honors education, one that may be achieved in different ways, including active learning pedagogies (Fuiks and Gillison 102). Fostering autonomy for *all* students in honors, however, is often a challenge. Although students whose parents have attended college may be coached to connect and network with professors, not all honors students know how to advocate for themselves. Honors contracts can democratize this kind of knowledge by empowering all students equitably. Contracts create a framework in which students can approach faculty safely, with a reason for meeting, a set of clear steps for project completion, and a calendar for subsequent meetings to support and develop the student’s project. For first-generation or other students who might feel out of place at a research university, honors contracts offer a loose script to follow. Because contracts do not assume cultural know-how and confidence in approaching faculty, students from all backgrounds are empowered to speak up and affirm their place at the university. Honors contracts can potentially give all students the license to express interest in a topic and specialize in it for the duration of the term. An honors contract can allow first-generation students to “reach higher by digging deeper,” as one of our respondents put it, in ways that most might hope for but not pursue for fear of the unknown.

Making contracts more accessible to all students, in turn, makes honors programs and colleges more visible to faculty from a range of disciplines across campus. Between 2013 and 2018, the number of faculty participating in honors contracts at KU grew from 8 to 200, spanning 58 disciplines in 10 KU schools and colleges. While some faculty were clearly favored because of the courses they taught or the reputation they built through the years, the program saw an increase in mentoring by faculty who had not previously

worked with honors students. These connections have benefitted both the UHP and its students: the more the UHP engaged faculty in the sciences, professional fields, arts, humanities, and social sciences across the university, the more likely those faculty were to refer a diverse range of students to the program. Furthermore, because faculty have witnessed the work of honors staff in support of all students' empowerment, autonomy, and success, they were more likely to encourage a broad cross-section of students to apply to the honors program.

In making honors contracts more visible, the UHP expected completion rates to improve and hoped that transfer students and students in professional schools might be more likely to complete honors requirements. Such improvements in retention and completion make clear the honors program's commitment to answer the needs of all students. UHP staff did not anticipate, however, that honors contracts would also provide such a fundamentally empowering experience to students as they developed essential honors competencies: research skills, critical thinking, and autonomy, in particular. An understanding of how the structured format of honors contracts helps all students to see and master the invisible curriculum of the research university suggests the value of assessing further how best to develop self-advocacy, autonomy, and agency in honors students. Although honors contracts, of course, are only one of many ways to achieve these goals, collecting demographic information and assessing how the scaffolding of honors contracts does—or does not—create access to faculty mentors and research experiences for students with marginalized identities might be useful. Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* claims that "access is pedagogy" (109). Honors contracts are far more than a stopgap: they are also a means for creating honors programs and colleges that are more equitable and inclusive. Honors contracts are a pedagogy of access.

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APPENDIX A

**University of Kansas  
Online Honors Course Contract Form**

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

Thank you for your interest in pursuing an Honors Course Contract. **Prior to submitting this form**, please be sure to communicate with the course instructor regarding their expectations for completion.

This form should be submitted no later than the 20th day of the semester in which the course is offered.

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

Student ID \_\_\_\_\_

Student Email \_\_\_\_\_

I expect to graduate this semester

- Yes     No

Select the current semester then choose a course from the list of courses.

Course Semester \_\_\_\_\_

Course Number \_\_\_\_\_

Course Term \_\_\_\_\_

Instructor Name \_\_\_\_\_

Instructor KU Email \_\_\_\_\_

- My contract is with a different instructor for this course.

*Please use the attachments button below to upload a copy of the course syllabus.*

**Honors Contract Requirements**

In addition to the course requirements outlined in the syllabus, please specify what you will be doing to enhance your learning experience in this course.

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**BENCHMARKS**

Identify the tasks that you will be accomplishing as you move toward completing your project, including a tentative schedule. Be sure to include any product, such as a paper, creative work, or presentation that you will complete by the end of the semester.

Example Benchmarks: Identify six articles to read, successfully develop a question on the basis of the extra reading, administer a survey, submit a proposal to present at Undergraduate Research Symposium, turn in the first draft of a final paper or of a lecture to be given to the class, etc.

Target Completion Date (mm/dd/yyyy) \_\_\_\_\_

Benchmark 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Target Completion Date (mm/dd/yyyy) \_\_\_\_\_

Benchmark 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Target Completion Date (mm/dd/yyyy) \_\_\_\_\_

Benchmark 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Target Completion Date (mm/dd/yyyy) \_\_\_\_\_

Benchmark 4 \_\_\_\_\_

Target Completion Date (mm/dd/yyyy) \_\_\_\_\_

Benchmark 5 \_\_\_\_\_

When possible, a student will be asked to contribute to class discussion and lectures on the basis of their extra learning. How will you give back to your class through the contract?

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**GOALS AND OUTCOMES**

By engaging in this Honors Contract, you should work to achieve the Outcomes below (skills, knowledge, professional development, etc.):

- Examples of Practical Skills: Can identify relevant sources from library databases. Can successfully use Final Cut Pro to edit my film.

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- Examples of Scholarly Skills: Be able to compare/contrast three different scholars' interpretations of *Brave New World*. Be able to summarize the latest research about the causes of depression among the elderly.
- Examples of Professional Development: Attend a professional conference. Create a writing sample/portfolio for graduate school applications. Give a lecture to my peers in class.

Outcome 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Outcome 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Outcome 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Outcome 4 \_\_\_\_\_

Outcome 5 \_\_\_\_\_

If you require assistance completing this form, please contact your Honors advisor or the Honors Program Office (785-864-4225) or [honors@ku.edu](mailto:honors@ku.edu).

*Click the submit button below to submit your proposal.*

## APPENDIX B

**Collective Honors Contracts**

**Description:** While Honors Course Contracts generally promote an individual student's initiative, leadership, and self-directed learning, the Collective Honors Contract is made to foster honors students' teamwork skills, creativity, research skills, leadership, oral communication (teaching/tutoring), specific pre-professional skills, and more, as appropriate, all while furthering the students' learning in the discipline. Collective Contracts can be student-driven, but they will more often than not be faculty- or Honors Program-driven projects, affording flexibility in developing honors experiences in area studies where they are rare or where there may not be the critical mass of honors students to justify an honors course.

To reflect the different objectives of the Collective Honors Contract, the faculty member is responsible for submitting the syllabus/scaffolded assignment(s) describing the project to be completed by the students.

**Expectations:** Honors students engaged in an Honors Collective Contract must

- earn a minimum course grade of “B” in the regular course (additional honors requirements are not considered extra credit toward a final minimum course grade), and
- fulfill the honors requirements as described in the Collective Honors Contract.

**Project/Assignment(s):** Honors Collective Contracts will vary greatly depending on the discipline in which they are developed. Ideally, the project developed by students under faculty mentorship will complement the students' learning in the course and foster skills beyond the scope of the regular course. Examples of Collective Honors Contracts include, but are by no means limited to, the following examples:

- Collective Honors Contracts can foster students' professional skills, leading them to engage in a teamwork-development project along the lines of work they will be expected to complete in the professional world.
- A small group of honors students engaged in a project to further their research or creative problem-solving skills on a topic related to the course content might be invited to share their findings with the group. This work could be completed through discussion-leading, a lecture-type presentation or presentations, or a sustained tutoring experience for students who may be struggling in the course.

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**Benefits:** Echoing the experiences students will have in honors courses, faculty can draw input from honors students on pedagogical choices or development of course content. Encouraging honors students to learn from one another as they develop their project, the faculty member can test different types of assignments that might, down the line, be meaningfully integrated in the course for all students.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# An Undeserved Reputation: How Contract Courses Can Work for a Small Honors Program

JON HAGEMAN

NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

### INTRODUCTION

In the first chapter of this volume, Richard Badenhause argues that contract courses have often suffered from ambiguous or homogeneous expectations, compromising honors pedagogy and learning. Anecdotally, not many positive attributes have been ascribed to contract courses in the honors community. Contracts often require more work than courses to establish and administer to completion. Given the shortcomings and the amount of work required to implement contract courses successfully, why are they used at all? I argue that, in some cases, contract courses—or non-honors courses that move beyond regular course requirements with agreed-upon independent study work mentored by the professor—are the best option

for small honors programs. At institutions where dedicated upper-division honors classes could not meet institutional enrollment minima, contracts can be used to create access to honors education that would otherwise be unavailable. Further, the advantages of contracts can be leveraged even as their disadvantages are mitigated to a large degree, particularly through high-touch, proactive advising practices, in order to improve the quality of the honors experience for students. At a small honors program, contract courses can be a cost-effective means of providing access to a valuable and customized honors experience for students.

Located on the north side of Chicago, Illinois, Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) is a largely commuter institution of about 6,400 undergraduate and 1,700 graduate students. NEIU is a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution, with 37.5% of its fall 2018 undergraduate enrollment identifying as Latinx, 27.8% as White, 11.1% as African American, and 8.4% as Asian. About 56% of students identify as female and 43% as male. Significantly, NEIU serves a large number of students who are immigrants or whose families are immigrants—over 40 languages are spoken in its hallways. The average age of undergraduate students is 26.4, and NEIU offers a robust series of evening and night classes that serve working adults. Importantly, about 43% of undergraduate students are part-time, and over half of NEIU undergraduates transfer from two-year colleges in the area.

The University Honors Program (UHP) numbers about 115 students (about 2% of the undergraduate student body) and largely reflects the demographic makeup of the university but with some important differences. Fewer UHP students identify as Latinx (28.6%, compared to 37.5% institutionally) and African American (10.2%, compared to 11.1%), while more identify as White (38.8%, compared to 27.8%). Honors also has a higher female-to-male ratio (77% to 23%, compared to 56% to 43% university-wide). Although we do not have an average age for UHP students, 58.2% are between the ages of 17–24 and 27.5% are between the ages of 30–45, suggesting that they are generally younger than the overall undergraduate population. The UHP serves not only traditional

high school graduates, but a significant number of community college transfer students. About 25% of UHP students are working adults. We also have at least five undocumented students. We never ask; those students volunteered this information. Since they are ineligible for federal financial aid, the \$100,000 in institutional tuition scholarships that we are able to offer annually is of inestimable help for undocumented students. The UHP is staffed by a tenured faculty coordinator/director (67% appointment) and a full-time administrative assistant, who draw on the expertise of an eight-member faculty advisory board and nine-member student advisory board.

In 2005, the UHP undertook a self-study and evaluation with an external consultant to assess the program and then to completely revise its curriculum. The result is that the UHP now consists of the Honors Student Program for first-year students and sophomores and the Honors Scholar Program for juniors and seniors. The Honors Student Program features 15 hours of interdisciplinary honors general education courses, and eligible first-year students and students who join the UHP after their first semester at NEIU but before achieving junior status may apply to this program. The 15-hour Honors Scholar Program for juniors and seniors caters to our large transfer student population. (See Bahls, "Opening" 73–76.) This program emphasizes a discipline-based research/creative activities approach culminating in a two-semester, six-hour thesis/creative project. Students who transfer to NEIU with an associate's degree from an Illinois community college (or with 60+ credits) may be eligible to apply directly to the Honors Scholar Program. Students in this program are required to complete nine hours of 300-level (upper-division) contract courses, with the contract stipulating a sizeable research/creative activity component. The size of the institution and honors program do not allow us to offer dedicated junior- and senior-level courses outside of our thesis proposal course, so contracts are by far the best way to offer an honors curriculum to our students.

**CONTRACT COURSES:  
A NECESSARY EVIL?**

Informal conversations I have had with my honors colleagues regarding contracts often include tepid to negative descriptions of contract courses, including “they are a necessary evil”; “we use them occasionally, but only when absolutely necessary”; “they are freighted with problems”; and “it’s complicated.” The last comment, while the least descriptive, is probably the most compelling. At best, honors contracts seem to be merely tolerated, but contract courses can also serve important needs, particularly regarding access and inclusion, as Dotter argues in Chapter Three. Throughout his introductory chapter, Badenhausen describes the potential drawbacks of contracts; they can:

1. turn the honors experience into simply “doing more”;
2. position honors programs or colleges negatively on campuses;
3. detract from the honors learning environment;
4. threaten the honors community;
5. challenge standards for assessing student work; and
6. complicate the relationship between honors programs/colleges and a university’s approach to resource allocation, faculty compensation, and equity. (3–19)

A reader might well stop at those objections, asking why anyone would seriously consider contracts.

Part of the reason contracts still exist and are even widely used is that they have clear and measurable strengths. Contracts provide a degree of flexibility and access to an honors experience that might otherwise be impossible, whether at a large institution like Dotter’s or a small institution like mine. Working adults typically cannot attend daytime honors classes; because many institutions do not offer nighttime and weekend options, contracts provide an opportunity for working adult students, at NEIU and elsewhere, to pursue an honors experience. One adult African American UHP

student, for example, wrapped up her degree in social work by taking night classes for her major and adapting them for honors credit through contracts. Without those contracts, she would not have been able to graduate with honors. Strictly in terms of the honors credential itself, the value added to her BSW degree helped her gain admission to her preferred MSW program shortly after graduation.

This flexibility brings honors education to a broader range of students, not only as a credential but also as an enrichment to their college educations. Contract courses can provide an exciting opportunity for students and faculty to work more closely together than they otherwise would, even as they allow students to pursue topics more directly aligned with their research interests. This is particularly true for students in highly structured, credit-heavy majors, such as biology, education, business, and computer science, where specific courses are taken at certain times and in a specific sequence. One of our adult computer science students had two children pursuing their own undergraduate degrees, and between his family obligations and the nature of the degree program, his time was largely spoken for. He did a contract for a biology class to use his programming and mathematical skills to model simple biological processes. This modeling required him to work closely with the biology faculty member to achieve optimal results. The contract project worked out well, and in the subsequent semester, the biology professor hired the student to work on a grant-funded research project doing similar, but more advanced work. The student's facility with modeling specific processes saved the lab time and money. The student later modeled changing telomere length with age for his thesis, and he had five job offers upon graduation.

The inherent flexibility in contracts can also become an asset when students are directly involved in research as part of the contract. As with the computer science student described above, some courses allow students to pursue topics that may be of interest as a potential capstone project or thesis. In addition, contracts can help determine whether a student and faculty member can work well with each other, potentially allowing the student to identify a capstone/thesis mentor. Contracts provide these important honors

opportunities not only for students whose majors have few or no honors courses, but also for those in small honors programs with upper-division curricula that may be largely composed of contract courses. (See Bolch.) This chapter explores that curricular imperative, asking how contract courses can work (or not) for a small honors program.

### **HOW CONTRACTS CAN WORK FOR A SMALL HONORS PROGRAM**

The diverse nature of our NEIU student population and the small sizes of both the institution and honors program demand a flexible honors curriculum. We have come to learn that contract courses can be advantageous to a wide variety of students in three ways: they allow students to 1) engage directly in research, 2) “test-drive” topics and faculty with an eye toward capstone/thesis topics, and 3) identify and build relationships with appropriate capstone/thesis mentors. To maximize these benefits, the UHP has created a two-pronged honors advising strategy for juniors and seniors that leverages contract course requirements to enhance the likelihood that students will complete the Honors Scholar Program. First, in my role as faculty UHP coordinator (analogous to a program director), I meet with each student upon admission to the UHP to discuss program requirements and opportunities, learn about the student’s major and interest in that subject, and ascertain post-graduation goals, if any (Hause). Subsequent meetings normally take place at least annually to review these topics.

The UHP coordinator normally helps the student identify a range of courses with titles or topics relevant to the student’s interests for contract adaptation and honors credit; together, they brainstorm some specific contract options as the student prepares to approach the course instructor. We use a handout that outlines our emphasis on giving honors students a more research-based experience, with brief examples of past contracts, and a reminder that honors is not more work but instead a qualitatively different kind of work (Lacey). The coordinator also offers to talk with both faculty member and honors student to help find ways of meeting student needs without placing undue burdens on faculty. Research

indicates that students of color are often reluctant to seek out mentors (Schwartz et al.), but the process we have developed in the UHP empowers students to approach faculty successfully. This individual advising is always available to students as they shape their contract experiences.

A good example of this process is the case of an English major. At her first advising session, I outlined how honors works and asked her why she chose to major in English. She said she enjoyed American literature and was interested in composition. We examined the English course list to identify relevant classes that might give her opportunities to explore this area via contracts; they included Young Adult Novel, the Art of the Short Story, Creative Writing, and Hybrid-Form Writing. We touched base each semester as she decided upon courses in which to complete contract work. Based on her experience in the courses she contracted (Hybrid-Form Writing, the Art of the Short Story, and Contemporary Poetry) and the Young Adult Novel class, which she took as a non-contract course, she decided to write her own novel as a senior thesis. This novel is based loosely on her own experiences as a biracial Muslim teen girl in Trump's America, navigating racism and xenophobia while trying to fit in and find a place of belonging.

The second prong of our Honors Scholar retention strategy is a proactive form of advising begun in 2016–2017 and run by the UHP administrative assistant. Evaluating each student's progress against an individualized advising plan, the assistant tracks completion of UHP requirements for each student in a database, reaching out to students directly as necessary. In 2016–2017, we also moved our due date for contract forms from the first week of the semester to four weeks before the start of the semester. As a result, if a student is due to complete a contract form but has not yet done so, our assistant can call the student. If eligible students have enrolled for the upcoming semester but have not yet submitted the appropriate contract form, she asks them which course they will be adapting for honors credit next term; if the student has no answer, she books an advising appointment for the student with the UHP coordinator. This process helps to cement in students' minds the expectation

of adapting one course per semester for honors credit, making it clear that the UHP coordinator is a faculty resource available to help them sort out the details.

We incentivize this process by tying our UHP institutional tuition scholarships to honors progress. Our scholarships are valued at between 3–9 hours of tuition per semester, and students can receive an award only if they meet with the honors coordinator for an advising session. In essence, we use program requirements and funding opportunities as tools to bring students into the office for faculty advising.

These strategies have helped to increase the number of contracted courses per year from 57 in 2015–2016 to 112 in 2017–2018. The number of UHP students during this same interval went up 21%, from about 95 to 115, while the number of contract courses has increased by almost 100%. We interpret these figures as evidence that our advising has made UHP students more academically engaged. Similarly, the number of students enrolling in capstone/thesis project hours has increased from 16 in 2015–2016 to 31 in 2017–2018. Students would be less likely to enroll in thesis hours if they had not completed outstanding contract courses: most likely they would not complete the honors program at all.

## **ALUMNI AND STUDENT VIEWS OF A CONTRACT-BASED CURRICULUM**

For the purposes of this chapter, I am interested in exploring how our advising has impacted our students' contract experience. (For a discussion of the role of self-reflection in assessing the role of contracts in an honors curriculum, please see Bahls, "Contracts" 179–86.) In summer 2018, the UHP at NEIU surveyed both former and current students about the outcomes of contract courses. The author and the NEIU Office of Institutional Research created a Qualtrics survey about relationships between contract courses and capstone/thesis projects and between contract courses and capstone/thesis advisors to be distributed to 63 UHP alumni who graduated between spring 2013 and summer 2018. This survey was

open for two weeks, with two reminders, and we received complete responses from 28 alumni. Five current students preparing to begin their theses in fall 2018 were also engaged by the author as part of regular advising to discuss these same kinds of relationships.

For the alumni survey, we were specifically interested in whether contracts helped students to identify capstone/thesis projects and mentors or even to avoid potentially difficult mentor-student relationships. Similarly, we wanted to learn whether contracts helped students decide against a particular capstone/thesis topic in which they thought they might have been interested. The questions in the survey and a note on responses to specific questions can be found in Appendix A. Tables summarizing survey data are in Appendix B.

## **Quantitative Alumni Results**

Table 1 shows that 82.14% of alumni report having been advised to use their contract courses to identify a capstone/thesis advisor. Table 2 shows that 75% of respondents then either agree or strongly agree that these courses were actually successful in helping them to identify a capstone/thesis advisor; only 17.85% disagreed to any extent. A full 75% report being advised to use contracts to help them identify a capstone/thesis topic (Table 3); 66.67% then agreed or strongly agreed that their adapted courses helped in identifying their capstone/thesis topic, while 18.52% disagreed or strongly disagreed (Table 4). The results in Tables 1–4 suggest that, with appropriate advising, students can use contract courses to their advantage in terms of identifying a capstone/thesis advisor and/or topic. Since spring 2016, we have regularly incorporated insights from these observations into advising UHP students, although several students were clearly advised this way before we made the institutional change.

Only 7.14% of alumni reported that contract courses led them to change potential capstone/thesis advisors (Table 5), while 14.28% indicated that their contract courses motivated them to change capstone/thesis topics (Table 6). Although these numbers are small, they do suggest the potential value of the contract experience for students unsure about their plans. Contracts clearly allowed some

students to test drive topics and/or potential advisors to check the intellectual fit. I would argue that without the kind of research-based experience that connects students closely with faculty in a contract course, some students might have ended up with either an unfulfilling honors experience or even a decision not to graduate with honors.

## **Qualitative Alumni Results**

Twenty-seven alumni responded to the question asking what they liked most about their contract courses. Of these respondents, eight saw contracts as offering the opportunity to “dive deeper” into interesting material, “providing a challenge” to students or allowing them to go “beyond what was offered” in a regular class. An additional six described working “more closely” with “eager professors” to “get more out of the course” and developing a “professional relationship” with their faculty. Four others “enjoyed the flexibility” of “having a say” in their own learning and the opportunity to “personalize” courses to their interests. Two comments mentioned that these courses were “really interesting and enlightening” and “allowed room for creativity within my major.” Two other comments indicated that the students unexpectedly learned about new areas of their majors, and as a result they ended up using these areas as part of their theses. Additional comments praised contract courses for helping students find jobs or for teaching skills such as how to conduct a comprehensive literature review.

We received only 25 responses about what alumni liked least about their contract courses, and of these, only 19 were actually negative, while the remaining 6 were “N/A,” neutral, or positive. Of the 19 negative comments, 4 indicated that some faculty were unable or unwilling to adapt a course for honors credit because, the students remember being told, there was “already enough work to do in the regular course.” Other alumni noted that “some professors were confused,” others “were not familiar with the UHP” or in some cases, the “department chair didn’t allow” faculty involvement. Five other alumni focused on the quality or quantity of work, saying that contracts “involved more work” (including “so much field work to

do”), were too “heavily research-based,” involved just “banal busy-work,” or contained “a lot of extra fluff.” Two others focused on the contract form itself, describing how the form “could be a hassle at times though I always enjoyed the courses themselves,” and even “wish[ing] there was a way to do [the paperwork] online.”

Overall, alumni reported enjoying the flexibility, personalization, and intensive experience of working closely with faculty on contracts. Some negative comments, however, suggest that the experience was a bit uneven and that some faculty were unfamiliar with this kind of honors experience.

### **Current Student Results**

Of the five students interviewed, all reported that their contract courses aided them in finding a capstone/thesis topic and/or an advisor. The contract course experience was helpful in focusing on both a capstone/thesis topic and advisor for one student, capstone/thesis topic only for one student, and capstone/thesis advisor for three students. Although this sample is admittedly small, the students’ experiences are nonetheless revealing, particularly when examined alongside the alumni interviews.

The student who found both thesis mentor and topic through contracts is a traditionally aged secondary-education major interested in classroom inclusion. Her first contract course was Young Adult Novel, in which she engaged in research exploring a broad range of secondary sources: her final paper was twice as long as the required assignment. This class confirmed the student’s interest in classroom diversity. Her next contract was in English Grammar, where she explored how to address and overcome communication barriers to diversity in the classroom. She created a portfolio of exercises for English language learners, built a thirty-minute lesson plan around one of these exercises, and used it to teach her peers in the course; this work allowed her to combine her aspiration to teach with her interest in diversity. For her third and final contract, the student adapted Language, Society, and Education by examining certain English dialect samples for speech patterns, formulating rules that speakers follow to produce these patterns, and presenting

her work to the class. She is currently writing a thesis that develops a one-semester curriculum template for discussing racial and cultural issues in a high school classroom. When I asked if her adapted courses helped her identify her topic and/or her thesis advisor, she noted that one of her thesis advisors taught the Young Adult Novel course and that, “absolutely,” all of the courses helped her narrow her topic and the form that her thesis would take.

The student who found her thesis topic but not her advisor through contract courses is a traditionally aged geography and environmental studies major. She took some time to consider my question about the relationship between contracts and thesis and then answered in writing:

All three of my [contract courses] ultimately helped me identify a thesis topic and methodology. . . . I found I was drawn to/stronger at qualitative research methods and in combining my major and minors in each [contract course]. The [contract course] that had the most impact on my thesis choice was a field methods course within my major. . . . I used part of this work in my finished thesis, which was incredibly gratifying and helped me make the connection as to what types of research I was truly interested in, and how I had been preparing all along. I selected my thesis advisor regardless of the [contract courses].

This student’s thesis is on shifting patterns of Latinx identity and gentrification in Chicago neighborhoods since 1970. One of her contracts was for a sociology course entitled “Race and Ethnic Relations,” and the others were in two geography courses (Field Methods and Gentrification and Urban Redevelopment).

Of the three students who said that their contract courses helped them to find a thesis advisor, two STEM majors attributed the relationship that developed to the work completed in the contract course. A computer science major in his late twenties found his thesis advisor when he completed a contract for his Mobile Development course. Part of his contract involved working as an apprentice on the faculty member’s research project, which led to a highly productive mentoring relationship. This student’s experience

is analogous to the highly productive, high-impact honors experience outlined for an art course by Killinger and Mares. The student is now completing a thesis exploring the degree to which people perform better on cognitive tasks in the presence or absence of music, using an app he created. A second STEM student, majoring in biology, also found her thesis advisor through a contract that similarly involved apprenticing with the faculty member on his research. The student reported having an “excellent experience in the class,” and she asked the faculty member to direct her thesis, which examines the genetic variability between populations of a plant found in North America and Eurasia.

Finally, one first-generation student majoring in psychology noted that her contract courses did not really help identify her exact thesis question, but they did help her learn how to develop a research question that was “innovative, relevant, and answerable.” Although her contracts did not connect her with an advisor, she nonetheless credited her contract experiences with teaching her how to interact with professors:

I was able to grow relationships with professors and discover their passions and areas of expertise. As a result, I knew exactly which professors I worked well with. . . . I felt comfortable reaching out to them, and I owe that to NEIU’s UHP. Without the [contract course] requirement, I am positive I wouldn’t have made these lasting relationships with my thesis advisers, nor would my thesis have gone as smoothly as it did.

Baker suggests how important faculty mentoring is for Latinx and African-American students, in particular. By working closely with our students as they begin their contract process, the UHP facilitates the kind of contact and mentoring that such students need to succeed.

## **DISCUSSION AND FUTURE ACTIVITIES**

In most cases, contracts have connected our students with faculty and given them the skills to succeed in the capstone/thesis

project required for honors graduation. Because some of the negative responses to our alumni survey were in line with broader critiques of contract courses within the honors community, such as those by Badenhausen and Bolch, our self-assessment at NEIU, although still a work-in-progress, has led to some specific efforts to alleviate these problems. Our faculty and student advisory boards have recently examined these results and will soon recommend some specific courses of action that we hope will mitigate many of the issues raised in the first alumni survey. While our advising has nearly doubled the number of contracts each year, we are, of course, primarily concerned with the quality of each contract experience for students. Our key steps moving forward are to educate faculty, standardize the contract process while continuing to encourage creative approaches to content, and expand our assessment to the faculty who teach honors courses.

Faculty will be our first emphasis. In spite of a long history at NEIU, the UHP is not well known at the university. Thus, we have decided to launch an information campaign led by the coordinator and the UHP Advisory Board faculty, who have agreed to serve as honors representatives within their departments. The UHP coordinator is working with department chairs to visit department meetings, where he will talk with faculty about the UHP processes regarding contract courses. Such discussion will directly address misunderstandings about what the courses are, how they work, and what extra effort, if any, may be required of faculty. We are a unionized faculty, and contracts are not currently remunerated; faculty choose to mentor contracts as part of their commitment to student development. Our ongoing programmatic assessment will involve surveying contract faculty, much as we did our students, with questions including the following: 1) What would you have wanted to know *before* talking with UHP students to establish the contract? 2) What strengths and shortcomings did the contract course model have from your perspective? and 3) How would you suggest improving the contract process or requirements? One goal of meeting with and surveying faculty is to ensure that all students can expect a uniformly high-quality experience in a context where

such quality assurance can be difficult to achieve. Another goal is to provide important information regarding faculty effort and contracts, which may be incorporated into the next faculty contract negotiation.

Our honors advising can also help to achieve this goal. Although we have emphasized the need to advise students early and often, particularly on contracts as a means of identifying a capstone/thesis topic and advisor, the student survey has reminded us of the need to continue emphasizing the process of designing contract courses with clear goals and objectives. These refinements involve closer oversight of the forms and proposed modifications to existing courses themselves to keep the students from being underworked or overworked, and they may include using the faculty UHP Advisory Board as a review panel for contracts to ensure that honors learning outcomes are being met. The process will focus on how a quality contract experience can prepare students for an outstanding capstone/thesis experience.

Finally, there is the question of the form itself. Although NEIU uses Banner, many of the Banner functions that would enable a paperless experience are not yet enabled in our campus system. One of the ideas we can consider is working with the administration as appropriate modules become enabled in the future to ensure that the UHP is one of the areas of the university that has access to paperless forms. In the meantime, we plan to update our forms to foreground learning outcomes and objectives in contract courses.

## **CONCLUSION**

Contract courses backed by proactive, high-impact advising can provide access to honors for a highly diverse student body. We anticipate little growth in our undergraduate student population in the next several years, and in light of the risk-averse nature of high-achieving students, we also expect that, accordingly, our honors program may grow only slightly. Thus, until we see indications of change in either of these areas, our short-term goal is to fine-tune the existing curriculum and our processes around contracts

to the extent possible. We have to some degree mitigated certain shortcomings of contract courses, including impact on the honors learning environment and the perception that the honors experience is about doing more work. We hope that educating faculty and chairs across the university about honors education, as well as listening for suggestions to improve the contract process, will produce higher quality contract experiences for our students. Part of what makes our program so useful at NEIU is that it is hugely flexible: we can address the needs of a variety of students, regardless of age, class, race or ethnicity, religion, citizenship, parental situation, employment, marital or retirement status, and credit hours per term.

Certainly I would never recommend our model as a replacement for schools with sufficient enrollment and institutional support to offer dedicated honors courses to juniors and seniors. As Badenhausen points out, the latter configuration is preferable for many reasons. For institutions with limited resources, small honors programs, and a highly diverse student body, however, I am convinced that our model is an example of one way to provide access to an honors experience that would otherwise not exist for students who, for a variety of reasons, do not attend larger and more prestigious institutions. This work is of immense value to students from all backgrounds who seek to push their educations further and thus open doors for employment or graduate education. As demographics shift across the United States in the next decade and colleges and universities become increasingly inclusive, small institutions and programs might benefit from a flexible honors strategy that leverages contracts through proactive and personal advising.

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**APPENDIX A**

**Survey Instrument**

*The survey distributed to honors alumni consisted of the questions listed below.*

1. When did you graduate from NEIU? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Were you advised by the UHP Coordinator to use contract courses to help identify your capstone/thesis advisor?

Yes     No

3. Were you advised by the UHP Coordinator to use contract courses to help identify your capstone/thesis topic?

Yes     No

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
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4. My contract courses were helpful in identifying a capstone/thesis advisor.

5. My contract courses were helpful in identifying a capstone/thesis topic.

6. I thought I had identified a faculty member I liked to be my capstone/thesis advisor. After taking a contract course with this faculty member, I chose someone else as an advisor.

7. I had an idea for a capstone/thesis. At least one contract course convinced me to do something different for a capstone/thesis.

8. What is the one thing you liked best about your contract courses?

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9. What is the one thing you liked least about your contract courses?

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*Note: While all 28 respondents answered the first seven questions (except question 5), only 27 described what they liked best, and 25 shared what they liked least.*

## APPENDIX B

## Tables

*Please note that percentage totals may not equal 100% because of rounding.*

**Table 1. Number of Alumni Reporting Being Advised to Use Their Contract Courses to Identify a Capstone/Thesis Advisor**

Answer	Percent	Count
Yes	82.14	23
No	10.71	3
Not sure	7.14	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>99.99</b>	<b>28</b>

**Table 2. Number of Alumni Reporting Their Contract Courses Helped Them to Identify a Capstone/Thesis Advisor**

Answer	Percent	Count
Strongly agree	46.43	13
Somewhat agree	28.57	8
Neither agree nor disagree	3.57	1
Somewhat disagree	10.71	3
Strongly disagree	7.14	2
Not applicable	3.57	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>99.99</b>	<b>28</b>

**Table 3. Number of Alumni Reporting Being Advised to Use Their Contract Courses to Identify a Capstone/Thesis Topic**

Answer	Percent	Count
Yes	75.00	21
No	14.29	4
Not sure	10.71	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>28</b>

**Table 4. Number of Alumni Reporting Their Contract Courses Helped Them to Identify a Capstone/Thesis Topic**

Answer	Percent	Count
Strongly agree	40.74	11
Somewhat agree	25.93	7
Neither agree nor disagree	11.11	3
Somewhat disagree	11.11	3
Strongly disagree	7.41	2
Not applicable	3.70	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>27</b>

**Table 5. Number of Alumni Reporting Their Contract Courses Convinced Them to Select a Different Faculty Advisor for Their Capstone/Thesis Project Than the Faculty Member They Originally Identified**

Answer	Percent	Count
Strongly agree	3.57	1
Somewhat agree	3.57	1
Neither agree nor disagree	0.00	0
Somewhat disagree	3.57	1
Strongly disagree	60.71	17
Not applicable	28.57	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>99.99</b>	<b>28</b>

**Table 6. Number of Alumni Reporting Their Contract Courses Convinced Them to Select a Different Topic for Their Capstone/Thesis Project Than the Topic They Originally Identified**

Answer	Percent	Count
Strongly agree	3.57	1
Somewhat agree	10.71	3
Neither agree nor disagree	25.00	7
Somewhat disagree	10.71	3
Strongly disagree	32.14	9
Not applicable	17.86	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>99.99</b>	<b>28</b>



## CHAPTER FIVE

# One Hand Washes the Other: Designing Mutually Beneficial Honors Contracts

ANTONINA BAMBINA  
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

At their best, honors contracts can be creative, challenging, exceptional learning opportunities for students and faculty. At their worst, they promote busywork that fails to deliver enhanced educational experiences. While I am proud of the many contracts that allowed honors students at my former institution, the University of Southern Indiana, to collaborate on customized learning and deeper relationships with course material and faculty, I also found myself on occasion having to apologize to students or faculty for the stunted, lackluster projects that one party or the other proposed. These conflicting sentiments illustrate why Richard Badenhausen urges the honors community to engage in the “thought exercise” of considering, evaluating, and improving honors contracts (5). One way that directors or deans may begin this work is by supporting

contracts that promise mutual benefits for both students and faculty. Honors can develop a culture of rewarding contracts through guidance, encouragement, and examples that motivate students and faculty to design projects that inspire and excite both parties. This chapter describes over a dozen creative ideas for such contracts in five broad categories: teaching tools, collaborative research, promotional material, grant applications, and community engagement. Contracts that bring shared value to students and their professors enhance the integrity and quality of the learning experiences that are the hallmarks of an honors education.

The University of Southern Indiana (USI) is a public regional university with an undergraduate student population of roughly 10,000. I was hired as the first dedicated honors director in the fall of 2008 to develop and enlarge the program. Although I am no longer in this role, the honors program grew under my direction from about 200 to over 530 students in eight years, and the number of students graduating with honors swelled from 11 in 2007–2008 to 72 in 2014–2015. Because of these increases, the number of honors contracts also quintupled from about 50 in 2007–2008 to over 250 in 2014–2015. Although the program's physical space expanded during this time, its staff and budget remained the same. The program did not have the funding to compensate faculty working with students on honors projects, so some became fatigued and began to refuse contract requests. Moreover, even though the number of students in the program had ballooned, the university did not have the resources or ability to fill additional stand-alone honors classes, making large numbers of contracts necessary for students to complete the program.

Badenhausen rightly argues that a system in which students complete many honors contracts without faculty compensation is unsustainable and unfair. He also states: "Contracts can devolve when employed as a stopgap measure . . . and a crutch for under-resourced programs" (5). Nonetheless, when well positioned and managed, contracts can maintain a commitment to providing:

1. enhanced learning experiences;
2. opportunities to build deeper relationships;

3. access to customized, nuanced, discipline-specific knowledge; and
4. firsthand professional and practical experience.

Badenhausen asks whether contracts are “dirty little secrets” or simply taken for granted (4). They are often both, but they should be neither. Directors or deans can facilitate the benefits of honors contracts without overburdening faculty or compromising the honors experience by advocating and making possible contracts that work in everyone’s interests. These projects simultaneously relieve the workload of faculty and teach students valuable skills in a creative manner. This arrangement offers faculty non-monetary rewards that compensate them for their time and effort and gives students access to custom-made learning experiences.

## BACKGROUND

Although Badenhausen correctly asserts that the National Collegiate Honors Council’s (NCHC) “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” document does not specifically use the term “honors contract,” contracts defined as “enriched options within regular courses” have existed as one of four basic course types in the honors curriculum since at least 1989, when Samuel Schuman first published *Beginning in Honors: A Handbook*, now in its fourth edition (33). Schuman describes this curricular model as one in which honors and non-honors students enroll in the same class, with honors students completing an extra project (33). Understood this way, honors contracts can help satisfy six of the sixteen basic characteristics by providing opportunities for

1. independent study;
2. community service;
3. experiential learning;
4. completion of 20% to 25% of total coursework within the honors curriculum;
5. consistently high honors standards and learning outcomes; and

6. pedagogical experimentation and innovation on the part of faculty. (Schuman, *Beginning* 65–67)

Badenhausen acknowledges the benefits of contracts in situations that limit honors opportunity, but he overlooks the potential of contracts not just to remediate but to expand and enrich the honors experience and environment. Contracts can certainly address the problems of populating stand-alone courses with students or quality faculty (Bolch 49; Schuman, *Beginning* 35); managing students' scheduling conflicts and credits earned before joining the program and/or institution (DiLauro, Meyers, and Guertin 109; Stanford and Shattell 325); and navigating highly structured majors with rigid requirements (Bolch 50; Ossman 3). More positively, however, students also quite clearly benefit from choosing topics they can and want to explore in depth (DiLauro et al. 110–13; Hochel and Wilson 7) and faculty with whom they can develop deep collaborative relationships (Ossman 4). One nursing student from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, for example, commented that contracts offered "a very rewarding experience. My honors projects allowed me to explore areas of personal interest in nursing that were not covered by the standard curriculum" (qtd. in Stanford and Shattell 326). Independent study creates space for work that is interdisciplinary, community oriented, experimental, innovative, and experiential (Austin 14). Customized student-designed projects also give students a competitive edge after graduation; as Cundall argues, "The answer to the question about what honors has to offer is that it provides the kind of co-curricular support for an academically rigorous curriculum that enables students to graduate from college with a rich experiential background and to launch a successful career" (31). Personally, the one-on-one time and attention students share with professors in contracts builds independent thought, collaborative ability, and intellectual confidence. Professionally, good contracts can yield impressive resumes, talking points for interviews, detailed letters of recommendation, salient network connections, and valuable preparation for post-secondary education and professional life. These outcomes are not necessarily limited to honors students. Nevertheless, thoughtfully structured

contracts that award honors credit for such work and reflection give our students time and incentive to benefit from such opportunities.

The time and incentive for faculty to engage with contracts, however, can be a real problem, and Badenhausen rightly highlights the pressing, recurring issue of faculty compensation, particularly for programs or colleges with limited budgets. One strength of even uncompensated contracts is their flexibility: outstanding faculty whose department heads or areas of interest do not allow them to teach stand-alone honors courses can still choose to work with honors students on individual projects through contracts (Schuman, *Beginning* 42–43). Collaboration with a student who genuinely enjoys learning, values readings and assignments, and offers novel insights often inspires faculty (Werth 44). As Ossman concludes after surveying engineering faculty who work with honors students only through contracts, “Faculty benefit from interacting closely with talented and motivated students” (7). This caliber of student allows faculty to experiment and innovate with topics and projects that may not be suited to the general student population (Holman, Smith, and Welch 213). The experience may make it possible to tailor a project for regular coursework in the future. Additionally, faculty often appreciate that contracts allow students to earn honors credit in their regular sections because the entire class is enriched and elevated by the presence and energy of these outstanding students.

Nonetheless, the common shortcomings of contracts that Badenhausen describes can certainly lower the reputation of a program or college that relies too heavily on contracts (Bolch 51), fails to define and communicate contract standards and oversight (Bohnlein 154–55), or assumes that under- or unpaid faculty will agree to work that is neither recognized nor prioritized (Schuman, *Beginning* 42–43). Given that 64% of NCHC institutions used contracts in 2016 (Scott, Smith, and Cognard-Black 203) and that their use may increase as students accumulate more Advanced Placement (AP) and College Achievement Program (CAP) credits for general education classes, it is essential that the honors community heed Badenhausen’s call to examine this curricular tool intentionally

and thoroughly, set standards for its use, and provide guidance to achieve those standards. The USI Honors Program tried to do this kind of work, which is described in detail below.

### **MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL HONORS CONTRACTS**

In response to Badenhausen's appeal, this section delineates a method of elevating the standard of honors contracts by deliberately inspiring, stimulating, and rewarding faculty so that students gain exceptional learning experiences. Projects intentionally devised for mutual benefit not only help students to achieve their goals but also allow faculty with little time and resources to complete work they aspire to accomplish. Knowing that honors contract work will produce direct, personal, and professional value for both them and their students, faculty can uphold honors standards even as they inspire students with creative, engaging projects.

Honors contracts at USI follow the traditional model of connecting the contract to a cross-listed or non-honors course. For three honors credits, students must complete 15–30 hours of additional work and earn a grade of B or higher in the course; contracts carry no additional tuition cost for students or monetary compensation for faculty. Students may add contracts to any non-honors course with faculty approval. All honors students must complete 21 honors credits to graduate as University Honors Scholars. In addition, all honors students except those participating in the honors Living and Learning Community (LLC), who must take between two and six stand-alone honors classes with the other members of their LLC, can take any combination of stand-alone, cross-listed, and contract courses as long as they complete at least one stand-alone honors course. The standards and expectations of an honors contract are included on the form that students and faculty complete and sign, and, as director of the program, I reviewed and evaluated all proposed projects. When necessary, I would talk to the student and professor to explain the requirements and work with them to bring the project in line with those requirements. Once the student has fulfilled the terms of the honors contract, the professor evaluates the student's performance and submits a grade for the project.

To educate a broad USI campus audience about the value and benefits of honors contracts, I applied for and received an internal institutional grant to fund a luncheon thanking faculty for their work with honors students and presenting ideas about contracts. I asked a group of students and faculty who had collaborated creatively on contracts to talk about their work and experiences at the luncheon. These faculty-student teams showcased their contract work at tables around the room, and we invited attendees to mingle and talk with these teams about their projects following my opening presentation. We also produced a handout with basic information about these contracts. Approximately 55 guests attended, and our budget of \$2,000 easily covered lunch, invitations, handouts, and other miscellaneous costs. Everyone enjoyed the luncheon, and we received positive feedback from faculty and deans who were inspired to think differently about honors contracts.

The examples included in this chapter are drawn from that event. A few of these examples recount my own contract experience since I recognized their value before I fully developed and formally introduced the concept of shared benefits to other faculty. In addition to ideas that were successful at USI, I have also included some suggestions for other innovative directions such contract work might take. I have described in some detail each type of contract, along with its benefits for both students and faculty, so that institutions may tailor these projects to their own needs. Just as Schuman eloquently wrote about some of the examples he used in *Honors Programs at Smaller Colleges*, mine in this chapter are meant to suggest “possibilities and multiple models from which to pick and choose, to modify, to adapt, or to ignore depending upon institutional need, culture, and history” (8).

### **Teaching Tools: Literature Reviews, Class Leadership, and Media Production**

USI faculty have successfully engaged honors students in contracts designed to develop valuable teaching tools. When preparing for class, faculty strive to stay up to date on knowledge in their

disciplines and to make that knowledge relevant to the young people they teach. Keeping up with regularly published journals and the changing needs and sentiments of students, however, takes time and attention faculty may not always have. Honors students are well suited to work with faculty on these tasks. One way that honors students can help professors stay current in their disciplines, for example, is by conducting a literature review of recent publications. This activity teaches students key skills, such as how to complete a relevant literature review of contemporary debates in an area of interest, identify and summarize important points in their own words, and define what constitutes good research and professional writing. The professor can review the student's survey of the topic to gain a broad understanding of current debates in the field, choose which articles to read, and decide what to incorporate into a course. These tasks can quite clearly be accomplished in an efficient way by working with a qualified student.

I employed this approach in an honors contract with a student in my Medical Sociology course. The young man was a pre-med student who planned to become a general practitioner. He and I talked about his interests and mine, current topics he was curious about, and those that I might like to research for inclusion in the course. We settled on a literature review that explored the debate surrounding how doctors use technology to communicate with their patients. The student did some preliminary research and decided to focus on three distinct concerns within this broader topic: ways in which doctors could use technology to communicate with patients; questions of compensation and legal liability; and social, cultural, and medical implications of this form of doctor-patient communication. He wrote a review of four articles for each category, including an up-to-date overview of the topic, contentious questions with arguments and evidence on both sides of the debate, and a final summation of the important points to consider.

This exercise proved to be helpful for both of us. My student became familiar with research to consider as he weighed whether to communicate with his patients electronically in the future. Additionally, if he were to join a medical group interested in this

question, he could be a source of valuable, timely knowledge on the topic. His literature review also informed me about the current state of the debate surrounding electronic doctor-patient communications. I selected a few articles to read in their entirety, included some as course readings, and incorporated much of the current information into my lectures. It was a satisfying and fruitful project for both of us, and the letter of recommendation I later wrote for his medical school applications recounted our work together and how much we both learned in the process. This example also demonstrates how these projects can cross disciplinary lines. The literature my student included came from both sociological and medical journals, making it relevant to both my class on medical sociology and his future in the medical field.

Offering students the opportunity to be responsible for planning and leading a class is a more performative way to design productive contracts. For example, an honors student majoring in criminal justice studies wanted to complete an honors contract in my Sociology of Aging course. I knew her well and was confident in her ability to accomplish the task. We discussed her topics of interest as well as those I felt were not already covered in the course, and we agreed to focus the contract on the pronounced, yet overlooked issue of aging in prison. Large numbers of Americans are incarcerated, and habitual-offender laws (otherwise known as “three-strikes laws”) lead to life sentences and aging prisoners. The problem of aging inmates is a timely and relevant topic for a sociology of aging class but not one for which I was prepared or inclined to create my own lecture.

My student submitted four potential readings weeks in advance, from which I selected two to assign. She delivered her lecture and PowerPoint presentation to me twice, modifying and refining it each time before finally presenting it to the class. We also reviewed her in-class assignment to ensure that it was understandable and would accomplish her learning objectives. She led an excellent class: the students were engaged and, in some cases, actually incensed by her presentation. She handled all of the questions as a well-informed academic would, bringing calm to the room

and conducting an extensive and lively discussion that left no time for the in-class activity she had planned. She also created a cross-disciplinary learning opportunity for students majoring primarily in areas related to health professions. Later, I composed a detailed, glowing letter of recommendation for her graduate school application, reflecting on her exemplary and impressive execution of this personally meaningful assignment. Another sociology professor successfully worked with his honors student on a similar assignment: that student led one period of a class discussion about the difference between how social movements are perceived by the public, treated by the state, and reported by the media in the United States and in her native country of Ukraine.

Media production can also benefit both parties: honors students can research and produce electronic content that faculty can then use in traditional or online courses. Two USI honors nursing students, for example, went on a faculty-led trip to England and created a video contrasting nursing in the United Kingdom with nursing in the United States. The students paid for part of the trip, and the honors program assisted them with study abroad scholarships. They identified three aspects of nursing that differed between the countries and secured permission to visit two hospitals where they could record interviews with nurses, doctors, and staff about these issues. The finished product was an informative and educational video exploring these differences through the students' field research. Because the video was made by two students, it was also fun, lighthearted, and fresh. Nursing faculty were then free to include it in traditional and online classes about international nursing experiences.

The kind and content of media produced for such an honors contract can, of course, vary and might include podcasts, public service pieces, or even audio walking tours relevant to a particular major or topic (DiLauro et al. 110). Using diverse media to deliver lessons, examples, or directions makes the content more accessible to different learning styles and allows faculty to connect with wider audiences. The possibilities are endless and span disciplines: chemistry majors can record lab work demonstrations for future

assignments; engineering students can film building methods to teach or challenge high school students to construct something similar; and business students can compile podcasts interviewing local business leaders and directors of organizations about their professional relationships in the community. Each of these approaches offers a template for honors students to learn about their interests and create a product of value and use to faculty.

### **Collaborative Research: Presentations and Publications**

The obligation to produce conference presentations and publications is central to a faculty member's role. The support and momentum to accomplish this work can come in part from honors students completing contracts that span one or more semesters and take the form of laboratory, library, or field research. At USI, two honors students on another faculty-led trip to England worked with their professor to compare obesity rates in the United Kingdom and the United States. They examined research and collected data on obesity rates in both countries before the trip, completed more research at the host university's library in the UK, interviewed local health care professionals there, and conducted similar interviews upon returning to the US. The honors students and their professor presented their results at a conference together. The students enjoyed both a focused learning experience on their trip and the opportunity to share their findings at the conference; their professor benefited from their contributions to this conference presentation.

Beyond presentations, students in a variety of disciplines have also worked with faculty at USI on research that was eventually published. Faculty in geology, biology, health professions, and criminal justice studies have conducted and published research with the assistance of honors students working on contracts. Students can be involved in the publication process in many ways: collecting articles for a literature review, assisting with experiments, collecting and/or analyzing specimens or data, and drafting or editing parts of the text. A few students have even co-authored papers with their professors during their time as undergraduates. For example,

a gerontology professor partnered with her student and other colleagues to construct an attitude scale that is now used to evaluate efficacy of classroom activities designed to “address and challenge students’ attitudes toward older adults and the aging process.” The group created an online diagnostic scale that is publicly available for use (Ligon et al.). The honors student also co-authored a paper in *Educational Gerontology* about building that scale.

At times, students’ contributions were too limited to earn the status of co-author, but they nonetheless benefited both personally and professionally by learning the research process and the content of publishable work in their disciplines. An interesting hybrid of research and publication was one honors contract in which a health professions professor asked his honors student to find and summarize a group of case studies to be included in a textbook he was writing. The student was ultimately credited as the author of the case studies in this textbook. In every instance, faculty gained precious assistance and support in accomplishing essential academic and professional goals while students built concrete, meaningful research and professional experience.

## **Promotional Material**

Creating promotional material such as a newsletter, brochure, presentation, or web video is another kind of mutually beneficial project for students and faculty. Honors students can design and produce promotional materials both to gain deeper understanding of a topic and to have the experience of assisting professors in presenting topics to the public or in fine-tuning these products to appeal to student audiences. These projects build upon the use of media as a teaching tool by tying promotional skills to educational initiatives that connect with the contracted course. Topics can range from academics (e.g., a website featuring research resources) to professional issues (a blog featuring research on professions connected with the course subject) to recruiting (a presentation to high school students about the real-life value of that class). Although these kinds of contracts have yet to be implemented at USI, one opportunity could be using a contract to showcase a popular marine biology

trip to Belize led by a biology professor every other summer. Many honors students join this trip, and a group could potentially create a video showcasing their activities and what they learned. This video could be shown to USI's Board of Trustees, shared with prospective students and their parents, and posted on the biology website to illustrate a unique and exciting learning opportunity for students. This kind of project teaches students how to present an overview of a subject in a way that will catch people's attention. Faculty benefit from the experience and effort of honors students in creating relatable, timely promotional materials, especially for a college-age audience.

## **Grant Applications**

Writing grants for internal and external funding is another venture that can result in shared value for students and faculty. The grant can focus on research that will be done on campus or in the field, possibly involving community partners. Students can be enlisted to work on conceptual components and to help write applications. They can perform preliminary searches for promising grants, complete literature reviews, compile topic histories, locate supporting documents, collect and analyze preliminary data, and contribute to budget drafts. Working through the entire process gives students valuable experience in how to identify and apply for a grant, experience that they can use in their future careers.

At USI, an engineering professor wanted to take a group of students to compete in the National Concrete Canoe Competition. The students needed supplies to build the canoe and funds to travel to the competition, so an honors student in the group wrote two grant applications for internal university funding: a student research proposal for the supplies and a student presentation proposal for the cost of travel and participation in the competition. When applying for these grants, students work with a faculty supervisor, but they must complete the application and apply for the grant themselves. These internal undergraduate grants are designed to expose students to the process of writing grants and give them a way to secure funding for projects that are important to them. All those

who apply receive from the review committee detailed feedback designed to teach them how to improve their grant-writing skills. For each of these proposals, the student wrote an abstract, literature review and justification, proposal, and budget narrative and summary. The students received their funding, built the concrete canoe, and participated in the competition. Students who work through this process gain valuable grant-writing experience, an impressive skill on a resume and in an interview; faculty benefit from assistance in procuring funding for their research or other projects in which they are invested.

## **Community Engagement**

Educational community outreach has been the aim of some mutually beneficial honors contracts. A variety of majors in the college of Nursing and Health Professions at USI partnered with the Evansville School Corporation (EVSC) and other organizations to create three community health centers. Before the start of flu season one year, two honors students contracting in a nursing class designed a brochure for young school children about proper hand-washing techniques. With the guidance of their instructor, they distributed that brochure to EVSC elementary schools and visited the schools to provide demonstrations and answer questions about handwashing and the prevention of germ transmission. Beyond their course content, these students learned about working with and educating a young population in the community. Their instructor hoped to decrease the number of flu cases at the health centers because children learned how to reduce the chance of spreading illness.

Such contracts can help faculty to pursue not only professional obligations but also personal research interests in the community. For example, a psychology professor who oversees USI's Safe Zone training on LGBTQ+ issues worked with an honors student in her Community Psychology course to create an educational video for first-year orientation, community events, and the Safe Zone website. In this case, the professor had assistance with an educational program that is important to her, and the student learned about

issues regarding the LGBTQ+ community. These projects can also directly benefit off-campus local organizations. A professor who works with the Spanish-speaking community, for example, devised a project that sent a group of honors students in a Spanish language course into that community to inquire about services they received, their level of satisfaction with them, and services that were lacking. After conducting these interviews in Spanish, the students compiled a report for local agencies working with the Spanish-speaking population to evaluate the extent and effectiveness of their services from their patrons' perspectives. The students practiced their language skills in a real-world setting, while the professor was able to help a community he cares about passionately.

Increasingly popular service-learning projects are also well suited to mutually beneficial contracts for students and faculty. Fighting childhood poverty is important to me, so I devised a service-learning requirement for my Honors 101 course, a requirement that could easily be adapted as a course contract in a variety of disciplines. Faculty can assign readings about poverty in America and require students to assist with youth activities at a local organization that serves low-income people. Before going into the community, students receive reflection questions assessing their expectations for the experience, with specific directions to cite in their answers what they learned from the readings. Following each visit, students then respond to similar questions documenting their actual experiences. Finally, they create presentations for the class and the organization, summarizing the experience and reflecting on its lessons. With this work, the students gain valuable real-world experience, the local organization benefits from the assistance and insight of the students, and the professor gets the students to lead a class and support an important cause.

Students might also compile reports on academic research for local organizations or community partners. Students can interview the group members of an organization to determine the focus of the report and then research agreed-upon topics by studying both relevant academic literature and the experiences of similar groups around the state, nation, or world. The final product can be

designed to help the organization with the specific topics; faculty members benefit when the organizations are important to them, their department, or the university. As these examples illustrate, community projects can be designed to help local organizations that faculty work with or value, while teaching students about these groups, their processes, and the value of civic engagement. (For an extensive list of projects that can be completed with community partners, please see Holman et al. 214.)

## CONCLUSION

Contracts can play an essential part in the honors experience for many reasons, and the need for innovative approaches increases as colleges and universities face a changing educational landscape. Many schools, especially those that rely on tax dollars for funding, face the dilemma of shrinking budgets coupled with a greater expectation that honors programs will attract high-achieving students. At such institutions, faculty can often be overburdened by the needs of their departments and university service, creating a situation where honors directors or deans must negotiate with limited resources and a fatigued faculty. Asking for more work without more pay is unsustainable and, as Badenhausen points out, makes faculty or department administrators feel as if “they are doing honors yet another favor” (14). Adding the workload of honors contracts can be a strain that many cannot bear. In other cases, faculty simply do not have the time to spare for the work, even when compensation is available.

Another pressure point on honors curricula is the increasing number of credits awarded to incoming honors students through the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), CAP, and AP testing, which make it harder to require stand-alone honors courses and frequently change students’ paths to completion. Often, stand-alone honors courses are offered within or alongside the introductory general education curriculum because higher level major-specific courses do not have a large enough population of honors students to fill entire sections. Programs may start to face a

similar problem with introductory courses in the major because of the large numbers of credits that honors students bring to college, many of which meet core course requirements. (See in particular Kelleher et al. 69–70; see also Bolch 50 and Guzy). Honors contracts may offer students who cannot take many or any stand-alone classes a chance to earn the credits they need to graduate with honors. As the number of students starting college with externally earned credit continues to grow, the reliance on contracts as part of the honors curriculum may increase, leading to greater dependence on faculty to oversee these contracts.

Although this chapter offers examples of honors contracts that can help faculty complete meaningful projects with the help of exceptional students, I caution against viewing such contracts as merely a means to an end. Faculty and students are not only up to the challenge and inspiration these contracts offer, but they often need it. The demands placed on faculty today can leave them overwhelmed and uninspired. Creating a space for experimentation and innovation can foster faculty development and have a transformative effect on the relationship between faculty and their students. These projects can lead to an environment that cultivates intellectual conversations and collegiality with young people who bring fresh ideas and insights and are eager to expand their minds and understanding (Braid and de Schrynemakers 81–82).

Honors students, too, often crave the benefits that come with the kind of experiential learning offered by honors contracts. In his article about motivating academically exceptional students, Clark cites studies demonstrating that students of above average ability are motivated by the desires to complete a task, to be creative, and to learn for the sake of learning (66). These students, Clark adds, seek opportunities to produce excellent work that validates their aptitude (72), and they benefit from verbal feedback that can come from close mentor relationships (71). One professor in Ossman's survey describes the potential benefits of honors contracts quite clearly:

Completing the honors contracts—besides being a necessity for getting the “With Honors” distinction at graduation—should provide the students with the satisfaction of completing a challenge that was designed to truly test their ability. Some students may thrive on the challenge. Others may gain confidence knowing that they can do top shelf work; that they are ready for industry. And others may enjoy the extra interaction with their professors. Surely, it is a unique combination of these (and other benefits) that drives the students. (5)

A well-executed honors contract can satisfy all of these important needs, and increasing faculty self-interest in an honors project can guarantee greater investment in the quality of the experience for both parties.

More broadly, honors colleges or programs at all different kinds and sizes of institutions can benefit from creating a culture of collaborative honors contracts. Two-year institutions often have a curriculum that is focused on specific skills and specialized areas. Faculty can develop deeper mentoring relationships with students by introducing them early to their own work and to specific skills that they use in their specialized areas. Such work with faculty enhances student learning with authentic, collegial collaboration, even as it prepares them for the more advanced work they will encounter if and when they transfer to four-year institutions. Engaging honors students in literature reviews or other preliminary research helps faculty to focus on the more creative and challenging parts of their research, even as it allows students to build theoretical and practical tools that prepare them for the next steps in their educational paths. For smaller institutions that feature close faculty-student relationships but may suffer from a lack of curricular variety, this kind of honors contract can allow faculty to share specialized knowledge in areas that may not warrant an entire class. Faculty can deepen their relationships with students by drawing them into a higher level of collegial specialization. At large universities, projects designed for mutual faculty-student benefit can strengthen the sense of honors community by allowing faculty to

pursue innovative work, often across disciplines, with talented students. In every case, these projects demonstrate to deans, senior administrators, governing bodies, the community, and prospective students and their parents how an honors program or college can elevate an institution and add exceptional value to students' and faculty's lives.

To implement a functioning, healthy honors contract system of this kind at an institution, honors directors and deans must promote the concrete benefits of this work while actively acknowledging the problem of contracts that rely simply on busy work. Badenhausen warns of the tendency to view contracts as merely adding one more thing, rather than developing a focused approach to learning (8). At times, changing a culture that tends just to require an extra paper in a contracted course may be difficult since some students and faculty prefer the path of least resistance. Directors and deans may face objections or distinterest from honors students who need to spend time engaging in internships, preparing graduate or medical school applications, or completing clinicals, and who thus may spend too little time developing a thoughtful approach to the one remaining class that they need to complete for honors graduation. University administrators want an annual increase in the number of students graduating with honors, and they may have little time for qualitative arguments about the impact of honors contracts. Similarly, faculty may voice opposition and assert their autonomy over the kind of work they assign, especially if they are not compensated financially for that work. The threat of a faculty member who may altogether refuse honors contracts can be very real.

Honors educators can combat these issues, however, by creating a culture that values and implements mutually beneficial honors contracts. To do so, directors and deans can employ a threefold approach: articulating the motivating ethos behind those contracts, formalizing guidelines and procedures, and educating and enlisting stakeholders. With the assistance of honors staff, faculty, and student councils, honors programs or colleges can formulate the rationale, guiding principles, benefits, and justification of this kind of contract, with particular attention to the distinguishing characteristics

of honors at the institution and the specific value that honors education brings. (*JNCHC*'s "Forum on 'Honors Culture'" is particularly useful in this regard.) Pertinent literature should be reviewed, such as Slavin's article, "Creating Honors Culture," which makes the case that the most distinctive aspect of honors is the practice of taking intellectual risks (16–17). Ford's essay, "Creating an Honors Culture," builds on this idea by emphasizing motivation and innovation and adding a passion for learning (28). Collaborative faculty-student honors contracts offer one way to celebrate, preserve, and renew these values in honors education. Such contracts create an environment where students and faculty thrive together with the expectation that honors will offer them something special. In meeting that expectation, honors programs or colleges not only improve their participant experiences, but they also engage the entire university by modeling the possibilities for outstanding faculty-student collaboration.

As later chapters in this volume suggest, contract forms and processes can foreground guidelines, criteria, and examples that embody this ethos, and honors must take the lead in educating both students and faculty about contracts and then in monitoring their progress. Once faculty and students begin to flourish together in this work, they become outstanding ambassadors for such collaborative honors contracts. At orientations, luncheons, meetings, and retreats, students and faculty can share their experiences with peers, describing how honors contracts have enhanced their personal, academic, and professional lives. Badenhausen laments that he is "troubled when contracts become a replacement for an intentional, well-developed curriculum or when they emerge as a necessary compromise" (7). Acknowledging that we are all troubled by these problems, we must accept responsibility for creating contracts that enhance rather than concede the honors experience. This volume offers a timely and valuable opportunity for the NCHC to begin thinking deeply and collaboratively about contracts. Only through such coordinated work can we meet Badenhausen's challenge of building contracts in the true aspirational spirit of honors education.

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## CHAPTER SIX

# Honors Contracts: A Scaffolding to Independent Inquiry

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**H**onors contracts can be valuable curricular assets if aligned with institutional goals and properly supported to overcome the challenges they sometimes present. At Columbus State University (CSU), honors contracts allow students to achieve one of our primary learning outcomes: honors graduates will demonstrate the ability to design independent inquiry projects that require critical and creative thinking. We believe graduate schools value this ability, and we know that employers in our community seek honors graduates who can work independently on extended projects, communicate effectively, and solve problems analytically and creatively. We achieve this important learning outcome by requiring a senior project or thesis and use honors contracts as a tool to develop students' research skills, connect their academics with personal goals, and help them to grow as professionals in their fields. With adequate planning and structured assessments, honors contracts can

be a valuable part of the honors curriculum and an efficient strategy for maximizing limited resources. At CSU, honors contracts have evolved from an economic necessity that replaced upper-division honors offerings to an essential component of our curriculum that provides fundamentally different educational experiences than traditional honors courses.

## **INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT**

Columbus State University (CSU) is an open access institution for students who live within a 50-mile radius of our campus. Our primarily undergraduate university currently enrolls about 6,800 undergraduates and 8,400 students overall. CSU proudly promotes the campus as one of the most diverse in the southeastern United States. With 60% female, 49.5% non-Caucasian, and 31% first-generation students, the institution's largest minority group identifies as Black or African American. In addition, over 80% of students live off campus, and 47% of our undergraduates are Pell Grant recipients. Our institutional strategic plan aims to serve this diverse population with the high-impact practices inspired by the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (Schneider). In particular, our institution promotes first-year experiences, international education, servant leadership, and undergraduate research. In addition, our new campus-wide Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), submitted as part of our university's accreditation process, strategically supports real-world problem solving.

Within this context, the CSU Honors College enrolls between 250 and 300 students, approximately 3.5–4.0% of the undergraduate population, and meets the National Collegiate Honors Council's (NCHC) recommendations for a well-established honors college. Approximately two-thirds of our students enter as first-years, with over 50% coming to CSU from outside the region. CSU's honors students add to the diversity of the university, representing both a student population seeking a traditional residential college experience and one commuting from around the local area. Our honors population is not as diverse, however, as that of the institution as a

whole. Only 20% of honors students identify as African American, Black, Hispanic, or more than one race; 27% have unmet financial need; 17% are first-generation college students; and 72% are women. The honors application asks students why they want to participate in honors, and an analysis of 253 applications yielded three prevalent themes: applicants want to socialize with like-minded peers, enhance their educations, and challenge themselves. As one student writes:

I want to push myself to work as hard as I can and to be the very best student I can be. I want to build strong, long-lasting relationships with scholars and students who are very similar to me, academically or otherwise. I would like a chance to grow and expand my horizons.

Our program attracts many different majors, with our largest enrollments in biology, music, and theatre. Overall, 34% of our students major in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and 25% in the fine and performing arts. Our curriculum must serve all of these majors while remaining attractive to and supportive of our racially diverse student body.

## **Curricular Objectives**

The primary role of our honors college is to attract and retain high-achieving students. We do so by tailoring our curriculum to our students' individual goals with three overarching objectives: broadening their educational experience through interdisciplinary studies, enhancing their collegiate experience with personal and professional development opportunities, and deepening their disciplinary knowledge with undergraduate research. Undergraduate research includes all creative and scholarly inquiry resulting in a well-defended thesis, juried performance or exhibition, or professional product that enhances an academic field. This broad definition encompasses everything from traditional theses in history and empirical studies in the sciences to lecture recitals in music and creative software design in computer science. All undergraduate research satisfying CSU Honors College expectations must be

grounded within a body of extant literature and include a manuscript that is presented to a faculty committee in a formal defense.

We meet these three overarching objectives of our curriculum with a combination of honors courses and seminars, on the one hand, and a point system that incentivizes activities that address learning outcomes, on the other. These point-earning activities, in which students typically earn one point for each academic credit hour or fifteen service hours, fall into one of three key areas aligned with our objectives: academic enhancement, personal enrichment, and research and inquiry. In the academic enhancement area, for example, students earn points toward honors graduation by completing activities that develop interdisciplinary perspectives or taking honors core courses that emphasize interdisciplinary studies; these experiences might include study abroad or the completion of a minor, second major, or academic certificate such as Medieval and Renaissance Studies or Servant Leadership. In the area of personal enrichment, students earn points by engaging in leadership activities or training, serving their community, pursuing professional development activities like job shadowing, or completing seminars on wellness. In the third area of research and inquiry, students earn points by building their capacity to complete the senior thesis or project, a requirement for all CSU Honors College graduates. The learning outcomes associated with research and inquiry prepare students to conduct independent research and creative work. Students therefore earn points for independent studies, undergraduate research experiences, the dissemination of research results, and the completion of honors course contracts (typically in preparation for a senior project or thesis).

### **Senior Project Requirement**

Students are advised to enroll in a two-course sequence for their senior project by the second semester of their junior year. The first course is a one-credit senior project proposal course, which has a prerequisite of completing at least one honors contract. The second is a two-credit course for the thesis (or an alternative to the thesis) and defense. During this two-course sequence, students meet

biweekly in small groups facilitated by the honors college dean or associate dean. The meetings are opportunities for students to share their progress, set personal writing goals, learn time-management strategies, and commiserate about the challenges that arise during the process.

An honors thesis can be daunting for many students, especially when they are required to complete a formal defense. Rather than shaping requirements in response to student fears, however, our faculty advisory committee and community advisory board are committed to helping students face and overcome those fears by meeting the senior thesis requirement. Faculty argue that students who complete a thesis demonstrate their understanding of the academic knowledge-production process and their ability to confront difficult intellectual problems. They also argue that the sustained effort required to complete a thesis often results in a highly valued relationship between the mentor and mentee. Working with a faculty mentor to solve a complex problem or explore a theory in the lab or archive is the ideal shared-learning experience for an honors student. Community members see this process as valuable for other reasons: these projects, they argue, demonstrate that our students can complete substantial independent work, a skill particularly valued by our business leaders in a series of focus groups conducted in spring 2017. Businesses desire employees who can deliver results on assigned tasks self-sufficiently and with minimal oversight.

## **HONORS CONTRACTS**

The CSU Honors College values the thesis process for all of these reasons and thus recognizes the need to prepare students for success by creating a curriculum that bolsters their confidence, develops their research skills, and supports the development of positive mentoring relationships that intentionally move students toward conducting independent research (Brown, Daly, and Leong). Contracts play an essential role in this curricular scaffolding. Before asking students to engage in a one-, two-, or even three-semester project confronting a significant problem in an academic field, we first require them to complete at least one honors

contract in the area of research and inquiry because we believe that these more limited research experiences set students up for success in their capstone projects. At CSU, contracts are not just integrated: they are essential.

## **Developing Research Skills**

Like other institutions, CSU defines honors contracts as clearly articulated agreements between students and faculty that describe specific activities to be completed in a semester and that connect with a non-honors course (Bolch 49). In our point system, honors contracts earn three points, which is the equivalent of an honors three-credit course, and students may earn no more than nine points for contract work. Faculty teaching the non-honors courses are responsible for mentoring the honors students in their contract work and assessing their final projects.

The process of establishing timelines and expectations, negotiating the terms of the contract with the faculty mentor, and meeting regularly with that mentor are all skills necessary for conducting independent research that extends beyond the constraints of a semester. Students learn not only from their success in completing these smaller projects but also from their failures. For example, a few years ago our honors student vice president, who was active in several campus organizations, proposed a contract on risk and resilience in her psychology course. The contract required her to research alternatives to disciplining children with spanking, produce a research-based report for a public audience, create a meme to “grab people’s attention and present facts in a creative way,” and link the meme electronically to her report. She clearly intended to make a significant impact on our community with this project. After several discussions with her faculty mentor, however, the student withdrew from the ambitious project because of its scope and her other time commitments. One year later, under the guidance of the same mentor, the student was able to build upon her ideas and initial research from the unfinished contract to complete her thesis: “Understanding the Relations Between Violence, Discipline, and Dehumanization.” This is one example of how our honors contract

process, which allows students to withdraw from a project at any time, is a low-risk opportunity to hone the skills and understanding they require to complete independent work.

## **Connecting Personal and Professional Goals**

While contracts serve the curricular goal of developing skills needed to complete a thesis, that particular goal alone has little appeal to a majority of our students. Therefore, in the contract proposal process, students must not only explain how the contract enhances an upper-division course in their major but also connect that contract work to their personal and/or professional goals. Students are encouraged to propose personally meaningful, creative projects that allow them to learn content or skills directly applicable to their career paths, that add unusual experiences to their education, and that create educational opportunities not afforded to them at our institution.

We provide students with specific examples of how contracts can enrich their courses personally and professionally, and since these examples were created by previous students, they build a more robust case for the value of contracts. A biology major in our pre-medical advising track, for example, completed an especially meaningful contract in a genetics course, exploring a disease prevalent in her family. Collecting and analyzing her family's DNA, she also developed professional skill in DNA barcoding. A nursing major planning to work in a neonatal intensive care unit researched best practices for pharmacological challenges and interventions on premature infants in her pharmacology class. An art major contracted in a photography course to attend lectures by international artists presenting at a photography festival in a large nearby city. Because CSU does not offer a film major, a dual theatre and English major completed contracts on screenwriting and directing to enrich the available curriculum. In each case, honors contracts trained students in specific skills and thus made personally and professionally meaningful a course that might otherwise have just met a major requirement.

Recognizing contracts as such an opportunity, we proactively advise our students to avoid the busy work of simply adding an extra paper to fulfill honors requirements; that option, as Badenhauen warns, can be tempting for busy students and faculty (8). Not only do we know from experience that students will be less likely to complete such contracts, but they will also be wasting the opportunity to shape their educations in fundamental ways. In addition, because carefully crafted contracts often engage students in developing as professionals in their fields, contract projects provide excellent work examples that can be discussed in personal statements or interviews or presented at professional conferences. Furthermore, the one-on-one interactions with faculty mentors can lead to future endorsements for awards, letters of recommendations for graduate studies or professional employment, and a mentoring relationship for thesis work.

### **Developing Professional and Mentoring Relationships**

For the honors student, the contract represents an opportunity to engage one-on-one with a faculty member before embarking on a senior thesis or project. Interaction in the classroom and written feedback on homework are no substitutes for this experience. For faculty, too, contracts are an opportunity to connect with students on a level and at a depth not possible in a regular classroom. Although contracts can be perceived as time-consuming, faculty at our institution have anecdotally shared that they find fulfillment in mentoring that involves discussion of their professional activities, graduate school experiences, strategies for managing a research agenda, and even work-life balance. Such mentoring introduces students to the world beyond the pages of their textbooks and homework; they often take their first steps onto the bridge between academia and the outside world with contracts. Talking with mentors about their scholarly work and specialization gives students a glimpse of possible ways to develop their own interests and skills.

These discussions answer a range of student questions from “How is research done?” to “What benefits can graduate studies offer?” to “Which skills are the most relevant in today’s fast-changing

world?” Enhancing the work of an upper-division course with a contract project teaches students skills of value not only in their senior theses or projects, but also quite possibly for the rest of their careers. Two specific students described below—“Luis,” whose interests lie in cybersecurity, and “Ethan,” who was curious about natural language processing—used contracts as an introduction to the field of machine learning, one of the most sought-after skills in today’s high-end job market. Their honors contracts not only helped them grow by enhancing skills, but they also defined a possible career direction that one of them has already followed since graduation.

### **Luis and Cybersecurity**

As an honors student in the software-systems track of the computer science program, Luis did not have room for additional study beyond his major requirements: the program allows for very few electives, leaving him unable to pursue his interests in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and cybersecurity. When he was enrolled in an AI course, however, the honors contract process allowed him to apply AI techniques to solve problems in cybersecurity. Specifically, this contract empowered him to learn about artificial neural networks and anomaly detection. In computer network security, anomaly detection is a technique for building a user profile for an individual’s normal daily computer usage. Just as the name suggests, the technique identifies anomalies in user activities that might flag unauthorized access. User profile information can become training data for artificial neural networks designed for anomaly identification. In his thesis, “Using Self-Organizing Maps for Computer Network Intrusion Detection,” Luis showed that self-organizing maps, which are a type of artificial neural network, can be effective tools for intrusion detection. He also found three major limitations of this approach: the difficulty of finding adequate training data, the time required for training self-organizing maps, and the inaccuracy of result interpretation by inexperienced users. The honors contract enabled Luis to explore and think critically about a topic outside his academic program and led to a senior project that allowed creative

scientific thought about a significant problem in the field of computer science.

## **Ethan and Natural Language Processing**

Ethan's honors contract grew out of his desire to work in the field of Natural Language Processing (NLP), an active area of research and development in computer science and a technology crucial to artificially intelligent systems. Ethan was introduced to NLP as a junior in an undergraduate research course with his faculty mentor. Ethan used the NLP skills learned in class for a contract designed to help identify patients with aortic aneurysms. As a leading cause of death in the Western world, complications relating to aortic aneurysms have substantial healthcare and societal costs. Detection of this condition usually happens too late, with a survival rate of less than 10%. Tracking patients with this condition is therefore vital for saving lives through timely intervention. Despite the enormous volume of radiology reports generated each day from abdominal scans, however, the task of reviewing them for potential aneurysm cases is still performed manually. Ethan's project aimed to automate this process with NLP, creating an algorithm for processing radiology reports and detecting any positive indication of an aneurysm. Using both NLP and machine-learning, Ethan sought to find cases in which an aneurysm was detected without follow-up. The algorithm flagged potential cases with a 95% accuracy. Ultimately, not only did Ethan's project meet our expectation that students develop skills related to our curricular area of Research and Inquiry, but it also exemplified collaboration between industry and academia on professional problem solving. Ethan built on this contract by spending a summer semester working as an intern with a company specializing in the development of health informatics software.

The experiences that Luis and Ethan gained through their honors contracts benefitted each of them in several ways. They both took the opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills learned in introductory and major-specific courses to problems of practical significance. Luis's honors contract gave him valuable experience with intrusion detection, a contemporary issue of enormous cybersecurity

importance. His final thesis project applied both cybersecurity and machine learning, which is an increasingly popular problem-solving method from the field of artificial intelligence. Although Ethan was introduced to basic NLP techniques early, applying those techniques to problems with real data and in conjunction with machine learning truly cemented his understanding and prepared him for a successful career in NLP and machine learning. He has already been hired by the company where he worked as an intern.

Both Ethan and Luis have demonstrated that they now know how to think independently and critically. Both of them were required to build upon their initial contract research by writing a thesis, which they then had to defend through presentations and question-and-answer sessions. They developed the skills to formulate a research proposal, shape a research methodology, analyze data, draw conclusions from experimental results, and convey their findings in writing and orally. The honors contract experience gave each of them a passion for independent inquiry. Although already employed since their graduation, both of them plan to return to research as graduate students in the future.

## **SUPPORTING AND ASSESSING HONORS CONTRACTS**

These cases illustrate the unique value of honors contracts and their essential role in meeting our curricular goals. Achieving these goals, however, requires a well-supported and administered honors contract process that gives students and faculty an understanding of contract objectives along with the freedom to develop creative projects that meet their own goals and those of the honors curriculum. Providing professional development and resources for faculty engaged with honors students in contracts is just as important as offering those resources to faculty developing honors courses. Furthermore, efficient movement of proposals from conception through approval to completion is essential for both administrators and faculty mentors. Finally, contract assessment must be embedded in the completion process and clearly aligned with curricular goals.

## Professional Development

Our professional development strategy for students and faculty includes a collection of online resources. For students, we outline the purpose of honors contracts in our student handbook and offer creative project ideas housed in an online library of past contracts that is organized by discipline. For faculty, we have created brief online videos, called *Faculty 5 Videos*, which describe honors contracts and their connection to the honors curriculum. The three videos, each approximately five minutes long, offer 1) an overview of resources available to faculty and students; 2) a guide to proposing and approving honors contracts; and 3) a series of specific, tested tips for managing and mentoring contracts. Rather than expecting faculty to attend workshops or devote several hours to learning about honors contracts, the videos are available on demand and serve as introductions to the process for new faculty and refreshers for seasoned faculty. When a faculty member contacts the honors college office with questions about contracts, we can remedy the concern quickly with an emailed hyperlink and a follow-up phone call. We also provide articles on mentoring undergraduate research and creative endeavors (Ticknor).

## Approval and Completion Processes

In addition to these resources, we have developed an online proposal and submission process that allows electronic signatures for both faculty members and the dean. The system, which the office of institutional technology developed as a workflow process, works much like electronic abstract submissions for conferences; it even provides opportunities for revision. Because it is conveniently linked to the student information system, students can select a course from their current enrollment registration. The form automatically fills other fields from their course selection, including instructor name and email, thus reducing data entry errors. The dean's view of the system features a color-coded dashboard indicator of the proposal status, making it easy to identify contracts submitted by the student and awaiting faculty approval (yellow),

approved by faculty (light green), and approved by the dean (dark green). Links on the dashboard provide more details about the proposal and options to edit, request revision, approve, or archive contracts. Finally, a separate downloadable report in a comma-separated-value (CSV) file is available for end-of-term reporting and personalized communication via mail merge. In addition to the online approval process, a simple electronic completion form is sent by email at the end of the semester, asking faculty to indicate whether the contract has been fulfilled and to complete a brief survey assessing their experience of the honors contract system.

### **Assessing the Impact of Honors Contracts**

Our assessment of whether students have met learning outcomes in our honors curriculum depends upon the collection and evaluation of summative assignments in our first-year seminar that are compared to signature work in our senior capstone course and senior thesis manuscripts. We use the data collected from assessing both honors courses and contracts for formative assessment. For honors courses, we evaluate syllabi content to gauge the interdisciplinary nature of courses and then monitor student evaluations, which include questions about the quality of instruction and student perceptions of whether a course challenged them to consider disciplinary perspectives outside their major. We do not, however, monitor the quality of student work produced in honors courses since that is the purview of honors faculty. Similarly, contract assessment focuses not on the quality of the product produced by the student, which the faculty mentor evaluates, but on the nature of the educational experiences through time. This system allows students and faculty to propose and complete a wide variety of projects as long as they meet the expectations of 1) enhancing course content, approved by the faculty mentor, and 2) developing skills related to our curricular area of Research and Inquiry, approved by the dean. Contract approval indicates success in meeting these expectations, and we then add to this data by surveying faculty upon project completion. This evaluative survey communicates our

expectations for contracts, reinforcing the information provided on our website and in our *Faculty 5 Videos*.

Faculty complete this electronic survey as they indicate contract fulfillment at the end of the term. For each contract, we email faculty the Honors Contract Completion Form that collects required information about the student's satisfactory completion of the project and optional feedback evaluating the characteristics of the contract itself, the approval process, and our professional development resources. (See the Appendix.) Even though responses to the second section are optional, we have enjoyed an 85% response rate.

### **THE IMPACT OF OUR HONORS CONTRACTS**

Beyond the anecdotal examples we have already shared, survey results suggest that our honors contracts are effective and provide a variety of experiences for honors students. Between fall 2013 and spring 2018, students completed 340 contracts to the satisfaction of our faculty, representing 85% of all proposed contracts. The honors contracts were mentored by 147 unique faculty members, who could answer the evaluation questions repeatedly if they mentored multiple students per semester or across several semesters. In total, we collected 327 surveys through the completion form, representing 96% of completed projects.

The survey asked faculty to identify all categories of work that applied to the project, and they were also allowed to describe projects as "other." The table below provides summary data about the nature of the completed projects. Clearly, most projects required some type of written report; however, only 36% of those responses did not also identify another type of work. Most science lab work, for example, also required a report, and many writing projects were related to creative endeavors, such as performances, artistic production, and software development. In other words, only 36% of the contracts produced only a written product. Faculty mentors agreed or strongly agreed that honors contracts required students to delve more deeply into the course material than was required of their typical students (96%), allowed the development of better mentoring relationships (84%), and produced scholarly work that

the student might elect to pursue in the future (70%). In addition, 36% indicated that the student was able to learn about the professor's personal area of research through the process. Mentors also found the process of proposing, approving, and completing the contract to be efficient (91%) and reported receiving adequate support from the honors college (87%), with only 2% (three faculty members) either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with either of these two statements. Significantly, only 2% felt that mentoring the contract took too much of their time, suggesting that faculty view honors contract work as part of their normal responsibilities of teaching, mentoring, or serving the institution.

#### Type of Work Completed for Contracts

Writing a report or a creative piece	251
Presenting the project	99
Working with primary documents	64
Working in a lab	52
Problem solving	47
Experiential learning	45
Working with a team	21
Completing field work	12
Service learning	3

Since fall 2016, we have added five additional questions to our survey in an effort to ensure a high level of student work and to align each contract with our learning outcomes for interdisciplinary studies, critical thinking, and evaluation of resources within the discipline. With 94 completed surveys, we have found that 87% of faculty believed that their mentees displayed enthusiasm for their projects, and only 6% felt that their students could have worked harder. Encouragingly, 34% believed that the results of the honors contract should be professionally disseminated, a belief that suggests the high quality of the work produced. Furthermore, 87% of faculty said that the projects required students to think critically about their topic, 62% claimed that the project involved more than one

disciplinary perspective, and 75% asserted that contracts required students to evaluate resources required to support arguments in their field. Overall, this assessment process results in evidence that honors contracts enrich course content, require students to think critically about that content, and reinforce learning outcomes associated with developing interdisciplinary perspectives.

## CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

CSU provides one example of how honors contracts can be grounded in curricular goals, implemented effectively, and assessed meaningfully. In our case, honors contracts support the learning outcomes associated with conducting undergraduate research, but they may also be adapted to other objectives such as enhancing service-learning programs, supporting the development of cultural competence, or encouraging civic engagement. Honors contracts are clearly not replacements for honors courses, but they can—and do—transcend mere budgetary necessity.

Before implementing a curriculum that employs honors contracts, we would recommend that institutions consider, as we have done, the following questions:

- How can honors contracts contribute to the overarching learning outcomes of the honors curriculum? What skills do you intend for your students to develop by completing a contract?
- How will completing honors contracts add value to students' educational, personal, or professional goals?
- How will you assess the contribution of honors contracts to honors learning outcomes? What are your points of data collection (e.g., student evaluations, faculty surveys)?
- How can the proposal and approval process be efficiently managed?
- How will you communicate the goals and benefits of contracts to your faculty?

- In what ways can you incentivize faculty to mentor projects (e.g., rewards for tenure and promotion, end-of-term book cards, stipends)?

The final two questions are particularly important, and we continue to struggle with them. While honors contracts are beneficial for students, they do, as suggested above, present extra work for faculty. That work is often unpaid, as at our institution, and inconsistently rewarded in the tenure and promotion process. Yet our faculty actively support honors students conducting contract work because of a variety of benefits, most notably the intellectual challenge or stimulation they experience in mentoring a student. This benefit is firmly grounded in the context of our institutional mission and student demographics. Since we are primarily an undergraduate institution that serves many commuter students, most faculty do not have access to traditional graduate research assistants, and some departments actively seek students who would be excellent additions to their research teams.

Our post-contract faculty surveys support this idea: 36% of mentors believe that their student's contract project allowed that student to understand more about the faculty mentor's personal research projects. When this pathway to research works, it can be transformative for faculty. For example, one CSU chemistry professor recently recruited an honors student in organic chemistry to join her research lab and to learn the process of synthesizing molecules as part of an honors contract. The molecules that the student synthesized were later used by another honors student on the professor's research team; this second student tested the attributes of the molecules for his senior thesis project. While this example demonstrates an ideal situation for STEM faculty, many—or even most—honors contracts do not directly relate to the faculty mentor's own research agenda. In fact, faculty at our institution often feel lucky when at least one of their courses connects directly to their research interests.

Even when students propose contracts in areas unrelated to faculty research, however, the benefits of mentoring can be pedagogically useful, as Bambina suggests in Chapter Five of this volume.

At CSU, an honors history major, for example, not only produced a European historiography for her contract, but she also presented her work to classmates and led a follow-up discussion. This project created space for intellectual discussions with her mentor and, in turn, sparked new ideas for a series of discussions in the course. The same student later completed another project with a second history professor who described, anonymously in our 2013–2018 faculty survey, how this “very self-motivated” honors student took on “an incredibly challenging topic on early Islamic/Christian apologetic and polemical work” that “effectively straddled the disciplines of history and religious studies—the latter of which is still quite new to her.” Together, they “spent a number of meetings reading texts, going over feedback on her drafts, and addressing many of the larger issues of the field,” a collaboration of interest to the professor. Whether such discussions enhance course instruction or research, faculty members most often say they value the intellectual stimulation of the mentor-mentee relationship. This benefit echoes the primary reason for students to complete contracts: an honors contract is the first step toward completing independent work and developing as a professional in their field.

Overall our honors contract system has evolved from an economically prudent method to deliver our curriculum to an essential educational activity that is 1) fully integrated with the professional development needs of our students, 2) responsive to the community workforce development goals, and 3) logistically manageable for a small honors administrative staff. The Columbus State University Honors College is a case study of how honors contracts can be used strategically to build a student’s capacity to complete independent inquiry projects. We are able, through our students and faculty, to provide diverse curricular options that allow students to customize their education while meeting the learning objectives of the CSU Honors College.

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## APPENDIX

**Honors Contract Completion Form**

Thank you for working with a student from the Honors College this semester. Please complete one form for each honors contract submitted to you this semester, indicating whether or not the student completed the work. You may also complete an optional survey below to help improve the contract process.

1. Email address \_\_\_\_\_

2. Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

3. Course \_\_\_\_\_

4. CRN \_\_\_\_\_

5. Please select one of the following:

The student satisfied the requirements of the contract.

The student will NOT be completing the contract.

6. What is the student's anticipated grade?

A

B

7. This honors contract included (check all that apply):

Working in a lab

Writing a report or creative piece

Presenting the project

Working with primary documents

Service learning

Problem solving

Experiential learning

Teamwork

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**OPTIONAL Contract Evaluation**

Please also take a moment to evaluate the honors contract process. Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement when you consider this particular honors contract.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
8. While completing the contract, my student . . .				
required too much of my time to mentor.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
produced an innovative or creative scholarly work that the student may continue to pursue.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
thought critically about concepts in my field.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
produced average work and could have worked harder.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
identified and evaluated resources used to support arguments in my field.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
produced work that should be professionally disseminated.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
analyzed concepts from multi-disciplinary perspectives.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
was not enthusiastic or engaged in the work.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. The process of proposing, approving and completing the contract was efficient.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I received adequate information and support from the Honors College to mentor the contract.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Please share any additional comments about your experience with this contract:				

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Enhancing the Structure and Impact of Honors by Contract Projects with Templates and Research Hubs

JAMES G. SNYDER AND MELINDA WEISBERG  
MARIST COLLEGE

### INTRODUCTION

The Honors by Contract (HBC) option is by its nature under-defined. That is to say, there are likely as many versions of the HBC as there are honors programs or colleges that use them. Some HBCs are attached to non-honors courses to augment the course content, whereas others are stand-alone mentored replacements for honors seminars themselves, following more of an independent study model. Some programs use HBCs to initiate students into the nature and scope of undergraduate research, and the deliverables vary widely. Likewise, the challenges and difficulties surrounding HBCs change from institution to institution. Because it appears natural to conclude that we cannot state the necessary and sufficient

conditions of HBCs and the best practices governing their use, it should come as no surprise that the HBC option can be not only a source of frustration and perplexity but also an important opportunity for honors program administrators, faculty, and students to innovate.

Justifying the HBC and exploring best practices are critically important because of both the criticism raised in this volume and a more general cultural skepticism about the value of the liberal arts and honors programs (Keller). Defining and justifying HBCs are especially important tasks because honors programs increasingly use them to supplement or replace honors requirements. This chapter proposes two specific strategies—HBC Templates and HBC Research Hubs—that the Marist College Honors Program recently implemented to increase the likelihood of HBC success. Our work applies some recent research in organizational behavior indicating that more robust pedagogical structures lead to greater innovation and more meaningful projects. Both our templates and research hubs are efforts to build such structures in support of undergraduate research in honors.

Located in the heart of New York's historic Hudson Valley, Marist College is a private comprehensive institution with a liberal arts tradition. Marist enrolls approximately 5,500 undergraduate and 1,000 graduate students. In recent years, enrollment and retention in the honors program have grown significantly, likely because of a new curriculum, a change of program leadership, the development of living-learning communities for first-year and upper-class students, and an infusion of resources and personnel from the Office of Academic Affairs. From 263 honors students in 2014, the honors program grew to around 525 students by fall 2018. In 2019, approximately 120 students graduated from the honors program, whereas only 24 graduated in 2013. In addition to HBCs, Marist offers a wide range of honors seminars that satisfy general education or major/minor requirements, and all students complete a three-credit senior thesis project and a one-credit senior seminar focused on questions about how to live meaningfully after graduation.

The HBC at Marist is essentially a one-credit independent study project completed under the supervision of a faculty mentor. Students typically register for the HBC in the junior year, after completing honors seminar requirements and before beginning the senior thesis project. At our institution, the HBC thus marks a transition between coursework and independent undergraduate research. The honors program does not offer a stand-alone thesis preparation course; instead, the HBC is variously used by faculty to instill habits of scholarship and research in students. No standard way to complete an HBC exists at Marist, and students can propose almost any kind of course-related project on which to collaborate with a faculty mentor. Some contracts are attached to courses students are taking, thereby turning a three-credit course into a four-credit course with additional mentoring and research expectations. Contracts are also completed independently with faculty members for honors credit. In the most general terms, the honors program uses the HBC to build relationships with faculty and to introduce students to the nature, scope, and significance of undergraduate research. This work requires clear, frequent communication between the honors administration and our faculty and students. Faculty are compensated for their work in the amount of a one-credit independent study, and faculty use HBC mentoring in self-evaluations for tenure and promotion in the area of teaching effectiveness. Compensating faculty for HBC and honors thesis supervision was without question an important administrative decision that increased faculty engagement and student retention at Marist.

The flexible, relatively undefined nature of HBCs at Marist is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, HBCs are readily adaptable to a wide range of student interests and fields of study; they lend themselves especially well to interdisciplinary work. They also foster faculty-student mentoring relationships that are critical to the long-term success and happiness of both students and faculty members. On the other hand, despite our best efforts at advising, some students and even faculty remain confused about the nature and purpose of the HBC. Our use of both contract templates and

research hubs has helped to guide faculty and students in the HBC process while still maintaining individual academic autonomy and creativity. Templates provide students with a common structure and roadmap for completing the HBC. They increase communication between students and faculty while articulating problems, resources, and the skills necessary for doing sound academic research in a particular field of study. (See the Appendix for an example of the template model in the interdisciplinary field of Applied Ethics.) More broadly, HBC research hubs give students the opportunity to join an ongoing research project at a center or institute on or off campus. Templates and research hubs thus provide structure and direction to students who may otherwise fail to understand and appreciate the valuable opportunity provided by the HBC and to faculty who are new to or confused by HBCs. Both of these tools communicate standards and purpose in a way that improves the outcomes of our HBCs.

### **THE PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR HBC AT MARIST**

The central values of our honors program are faculty-student mentoring, undergraduate research, and the classical Greek concept of *eudaimonia*, loosely translated as happiness, but more precisely defined as well-being, flourishing, or thriving. We have also been intentional in adopting a pluralistic approach to what counts as sound undergraduate research. Our values framework is supported by our program's use of HBC experiences. HBC work at Marist does not replace general honors requirements in our curriculum; instead, contracts are used primarily to expose students to the nature and scope of undergraduate research in order to prepare them for the honors thesis project in the senior year. These projects, we argue below, are central to student success both in college and after graduation.

HBC work engages students with research to help them build faculty-mentoring relationships that are central to their success both now and over the long term. It is hard to overstate the importance of faculty mentoring for academic success and retention in

college, and even for professional engagement and personal happiness long after degree completion. Today, however, an insufficient number of students find adequate mentoring while in college, certainly a missed opportunity for both students and faculty (Johnson 4–6). Students who report having a mentor are also more likely to develop important skills, gain confidence, practice networking, prepare for future workplace engagement, earn higher salaries, and even approach more elusive, yet equally important states like *eudaimonia* (*Great Jobs, Great Lives*). Students with mentors also report higher levels of satisfaction with academic programs and institutions, and they are more likely to be engaged as alumni. Faculty, too, benefit from mentoring relationships with students, which studies correlate with higher workplace satisfaction, career development, and even greater research output (Anderson, Lyons, and Weiner 9–10). Perhaps unsurprisingly, mentoring has been referred to as the “fourth leg” of the academic stool—as important for faculty as scholarship, teaching, and service, even if it is generally not formally or adequately recognized in the tenure and promotion processes of our institutions (Jacob 486). These measurable impacts make a strong case for the centrality of undergraduate research, and thus HBC work as described in this chapter, in building the kinds of academic relationships that directly impact the happiness and well-being of both students and faculty.

Some significant barriers, however, can impede faculty mentorship of undergraduates, despite the clear benefits of such work (Johnson 138), making honors mentoring opportunities increasingly important. Since undergraduates typically spend less time in college than graduate students, change majors or declare them well into their sophomore years, and sometimes come to college lacking understanding of the critical importance of faculty mentors, the undergraduate mentoring that does occur is often informal and unstructured. Honors programs and colleges, especially those that include research requirements in their curricula, have an advantage when it comes to encouraging mentoring because they create a formal framework for fostering these relationships (Johnson 139). The HBC provides such structure for honors students and faculty

conducting research and building these critical relationships. For students in our program, the HBC is a formal first step toward completing credit-bearing undergraduate research. Because HBC experiences occur earlier in a student's education than theses, they have the distinct advantage of forging foundational mentoring relationships. Furthermore, these relationships are not limited to faculty who regularly teach in honors, thereby increasing the scope and impact of honors enrichment to all departments and majors by including a wider cross-section of faculty. When successful, the HBC option provides students with a distinctive academic experience in their major or an interdisciplinary field of interest. As Anne Dotter argues in Chapter Three of this volume, honors contracts empower students to initiate important mentoring relationships, learn about the nature and scope of independent research projects, and embrace the flexibility and freedom to pursue their own academic interests beyond the content of their classes. By allowing students to complete their honors requirements, even as they build important research skills that set them up for success in their theses and future professions, the HBC part of our curriculum ultimately increases retention and leads to more robust honors graduation rates.

In addition to the focus on research and mentoring, our honors program has adopted a pluralistic approach to undergraduate research, an approach that includes HBC work. This choice is in part based on the difficulties—and benefits—of the flexibility built into HBC experiences. Our pluralistic approach is perhaps best explained by borrowing an insight from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: rejecting general descriptions, he instead appeals to family resemblances as an analogy to capture the variability of meaning and its application, a variability that we find key to the HBC experience. Wittgenstein recommends that we drop the search for universal definitions and instead travel through “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing” (66). The following section describes several distinct pathways our honors program has created to help students and faculty complete successful HBC work.

## **HBC OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND SOLUTIONS**

HBC work was first introduced to the Marist College Honors Program curriculum in 2013 after a wholesale revision of program requirements. We have, admittedly, experienced some growing pains as we have increasingly relied on HBC experiences to establish research expectations in the junior year. The primary challenge has been to maintain focus on core student learning outcomes in light of the varied nature of HBCs at Marist. We understand that our approach to HBC work may initially seem to validate Richard Badenhausen's concerns about eroding requirements and degrading the overall standing of honors on campus. With the formalization of HBC requirements, our revised honors curriculum did indeed decrease the required number of seminars honors students take, even as it introduced a credit-bearing thesis requirement. Yet since that revision, HBC work has become an increasingly important and successful component of honors enrichment at Marist. Despite our own and this volume's initial concerns, the HBC at Marist does not represent a compromise that honors must make on account of curricular, budgetary, or staffing pressures. Instead, Marist has embraced the HBC as an important and instrumental academic step that solidifies the fundamental values of our honors program.

The Marist HBC is a one-credit project typically completed during the junior year when students have completed all other honors requirements except the senior thesis. The HBC is meant to initiate students into the research process, and students will sometimes complete the contract earlier if they enter college with significant AP or IB credits or if they arrive with a robust research idea. HBC work at Marist is typically attached to a non-honors course in which a student is enrolled, allowing students to build a relationship with a faculty mentor while gaining a deeper appreciation for course material. Beyond the classroom, our HBC research hubs allow students to join existing, ongoing research projects run through various centers of excellence at our institution rather than only through a course. Such flexibility can extend beyond our courses or hubs to a student's choice of mentor. For example, a junior's HBC

mentor may be a professor whose class the student took in the first year; in an effort to facilitate such long-term mentoring relationships, we permit students to apply for an HBC experience with a faculty member independently of a course. Such applications obviously require faculty consent, and this non-standard approach to HBCs does not have any negative implications for faculty compensation or the HBC factoring into tenure and promotion cases.

Students, in particular, value the flexibility of our HBC curriculum. Since 2013, they have completed approximately 475 HBC projects with over 100 different faculty, a number that has steadily increased alongside the overall enrollment in the honors program. These projects are often outstanding: students have presented their HBCs at conferences and integrated them into applications for competitive scholarships and awards, including Research Experiences for Undergraduates and Goldwater Scholarships, achieving levels of success that faculty mentors appreciate and enjoy. As relatively recent HBC innovations in our honors program, templates and hubs, in particular, have helped honors stakeholders to succeed by clarifying and standardizing HBC learning outcomes for both honors students and faculty.

In theory, the idea of an individual HBC project appeals to most Marist honors students, but in practice, the act of defining one is often intimidating and confusing. Originally, our program attempted to solve this problem through proactive advising, HBC information sessions, and examples of successful HBC projects from various disciplines. Acknowledging that HBC projects can fail for lack of time or communication on the part of students, faculty, and even the honors program itself, our honors program has committed to taking responsibility for managing this communication, a choice that is resource-intensive and demanding for our honors staff. The success of our HBC projects depends upon active advising to ensure that students understand both what the HBC is and how it works. Every semester we host four or five HBC advising sessions, during which we discuss the nature of the HBC, the use of HBC templates, and the options for completing an HBC as part of a research hub. Such group and individual advising takes time

and requires annual repetition with each new cohort of students ready to pursue HBC work. In addition, processing the HBC applications is onerous and time-sensitive since they must be submitted to the registrar by the end of the semester's third week in order for students to register and faculty to receive compensation. Because of the potential value of these research introductions, however, we have sought ways to streamline and clarify the HBC process for students, faculty, and staff.

These programmatic solutions, however, did not always address the underlying problem: although most students reported leaving advising sessions and HBC events understanding the HBC in theory, they remained confused about what a contract might actually mean *for them* in practice. This confusion has led to uneven quality; HBC projects suffer most when the proposal lacks sufficient detail, often due to the absence of concrete understanding. The default student approach to HBC work is to write a longer, more substantial paper that satisfies both course and HBC requirements. While this choice is predictable, it fails to maximize the HBC experience. Ideally, the HBC should represent creative use of critical reasoning skills to bring greater depth and precision to any subject. Such an HBC experience builds critical and imaginative thinking skills that are developmental as well as instrumental to successful undergraduate research or creative work in any discipline. Marist's honors program developed the template and research hub models in an attempt to solve some of these challenges with HBC work.

### **STRUCTURING UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH WITH HBC TEMPLATES**

HBCs can serve as a valuable bridge to and foundation for an honors thesis project when a program does not have a thesis preparation course. Ideally, the contract process allows the student flexibility and encourages the exploration of topics in preparation for a deeper dive into thesis research or creative work. Developing a flexible template for the HBC encourages students to identify subjects of potential interest for their theses by asking them to think systematically and structurally about a past or present research

paper; the advantage is that they have help as they get an early start on this large-scale project. The template model encourages honors students to focus on quality research through an exploratory study of literature selected by focus groups of students and faculty. The HBC process always encourages self-examination and personal responsibility through self-identification of interests, motivating students to engage in further examination and research. Honors-constructed templates on a variety of subjects typically include the following content and requirements:

1. suggested research projects that are either discipline-specific or interdisciplinary,
2. an annotated bibliography to guide student reading,
3. a reflective assignment that focuses on the research process itself,
4. information on IRB approval and the use of human subjects when appropriate, and
5. broad-based resources for beginning research.

Templates are adaptable to discipline-specific or interdisciplinary material, and they often focus on developing specific skills that students in STEM, humanities, arts, and social sciences fields need as they develop academically and professionally. The interdisciplinary contract in Applied Ethics, which appears below in the Appendix, is one concrete example of how the honors program has created a flexible structure that builds specific kinds of student research expertise on the way to a thesis project.

Our template system has its theoretical grounding in recent organizational behavior research, which makes a strong case for how flexible structures—like templates—improve innovation and meaningful work. Research on organic and open-systems organizational structures by scholars like Tomislav Hernaus, for example, has shown that a systems approach results in both efficiency and meaningful work (6). A recent review of theoretical and empirical literature supports this idea by showing that innovation requires a dichotomous structure, while more monolithic structures promote

stagnation (Tushman et al. 1332). Research suggests that the value of work structure extends across generations: Mecca M. Salahuddin has found enhanced performance among inexperienced millennials employed in structured workplaces (3). Salahuddin also cites a study of generational differences by the Ethics Resource Center, which found that the younger generational cohorts, the “Nexters,” exhibited work ethics similar to those of the WWII veteran generation (3). These “Nexters” not only trust centralized authority, but they also need more supervision and structure to balance their entry-level knowledge and skills. A comprehensive review of generational literature also found that millennials categorized as “Generation Y,” those born between 1981 and 2000, work best in environments with clarity of direction, structure, and immediate feedback (Hillman 248). Jan Ferri-Reed, a professional consultant whose focus is nurturing and retaining talent, summarizes this situation by advising employers to be clear and precise with millennials: “The sink or swim approach simply doesn’t work today” (32).

The template model allows a student to apply structure to a current or former research paper and then to explore further development of the topic through an extended annotated bibliography. This focus makes the paper not bigger but richer, thus setting the stage for growth of a big idea and research question worthy of an honors thesis. When the HBC is attached to a seminar, this extension allows the student to engage in deeper examination while also building research skills. First, the student develops an introduction that includes reasons for the study (e.g., examining topics leading to the thesis, particular interests in the subject, a research question, and proposed hypotheses). We often then ask students to enhance the basic annotated bibliography by employing a sampling of best practices used in evidence-based research to validate the rigor of the articles (e.g., methodology, sample size, and author expertise). In addition to developing research skills related to the formation of an annotated bibliography, including identifying, validating, and citing appropriate research, students are encouraged to complete the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certification required by the Marist Institutional Research Board to conduct

primary research. While honors students do not always engage in primary research for their thesis projects, we encourage them to take the opportunity to register for the course at no extra cost as they are completing their HBC projects. Participants have reported a sense of accomplishment and pride after receiving their CITI certification. Finally, the template HBC paper concludes with the student's evaluation of findings as well as a plan for proceeding to the honors thesis. The student includes goals, action steps, and a timeline for successful completion of the thesis in the senior year. The resulting HBC is without a doubt significant, but the work is well within the scope of credit hours defined by New York State (15 hours of instruction and 30 hours of additional work per credit). Further, the honors program instructs faculty about a mindful approach to workload, and the program pays close attention to HBC evaluations to ensure that we strike the right balance between reasonable and rigorous expectations for students.

The process of completing the HBC is almost as important as the final product, which is the argument that Anderson, Lyons, and Weiner make about the senior thesis project (xi–xii). It is therefore worth providing honors students space to reflect on the research process of the HBC. We ask students to write reflections on the nature of the research process itself, describing both their successes and failures. They are also invited to discuss how the project connects with future academic goals. The template thus gives students the opportunity to focus on both their own personal development and on their research process, creating a clear path of academic work on the way to a successful senior thesis project. Our model addresses the barrier of limited time in the final stages of students' college careers by moving the decision and planning period from the beginning of the final thesis semester to the junior year. This schedule ensures that the majority of honors students' thesis time as seniors is devoted to completing the project itself. The process of the focused contract supports the development of the students' decision-making and critical-thinking skills as they engage in self-discovery through review of extant literature. Furthermore, it prepares students for a wide range of thesis projects in the absence

of a thesis preparation course. The exposure to quality research and results and the development of research questions give the students the knowledge and confidence they need to choose a subject and methodology for a meaningful honors thesis project.

In fact, the most demonstrable outcome we have witnessed is the successful completion of theses and the submission of documents to the library for publication within the agreed-upon timeline. The structured HBC has been useful in reducing the number of students requesting an additional semester for thesis completion. Students who participated in developing a structure for their HBC based upon the template were able to develop research questions, request IRB approval, engage in primary research, and include creative additions to their theses. Such additions have enhanced both the thesis and HBC experiences. One thesis student, for example, participated in a college-wide panel discussion, demonstrating the value of her research publicly, while another led an independent seminar on her thesis topic in collaboration with a partner who was only in the HBC stage of similar research. Both the panel discussion and the independent seminar resulted from HBCs in the School of Management, and both concerned women and leadership. The relationships between HBCs and theses thus create meaningful relationships between honors students and with faculty and other members of the campus community.

HBC templates are different from other instructional support materials, such as the HBC application forms, learning outcomes, and outcomes assessments, that are distributed to honors faculty. Templates are in actuality both broader and deeper: they include resources and a range of potential projects for students to complete. Templates are not a panacea for the challenges associated with HBCs, but they are part of a broader effort to engage students through proactive advising, HBC events, and exhibits and celebrations of undergraduate research that highlight contract projects themselves. In the future, the program will explore how to catalog and archive HBC work in order to recognize exceptional undergraduate research, as well as to provide a window into the research process for students aspiring to complete undergraduate research in honors.

For a variety of reasons, the Marist Honors Program first created templates in the areas of Applied Ethics, Leadership Studies, and Organizational Behavior. Since Applied Ethics and Leadership Studies are both interdisciplinary areas of study, students and faculty benefit from direction in how to connect and explore a range of ideas. We added templates for Organizational Behavior next because an analysis of our enrollment showed that a high volume of students complete HBC projects in this field. We will use Applied Ethics as a case study to explain the template model here since the concept of ethics is central to both our honors course and HBC offerings. The Marist College core curriculum requires that all students take an ethics or applied ethics course. The honors program itself runs approximately six sections of ethics courses in any given academic year. These courses generally approach ethics from an applied direction, and we have recently offered seminars on the following topics: Ethics of Food, Moral Cognition, Medical Ethics, Ethics and Journalism, and Ethics and Technology.

In addition to their desire to meet the specific demands of our core, honors students are drawn to ethics for a number of external reasons. Training in ethics is becoming increasingly important for students applying to medical school and physician assistant programs. Aside from professional preparation, ethical explorations also provide students with the context and framework to ask big questions about the right and the good, human well-being, and happiness or thriving. Furthermore, we have found that every year a significant number of students from various departments address questions of ethics and values in their thesis projects. Investing time in developing an applied ethics template therefore made considerable sense for our honors program. The value of the template lies in our effort to bring together students from a range of majors and faculty from different departments in articulating a consistent set of academic standards and problems in this interdisciplinary field. This work provides students with a solid foundation in both ethical theory and application, whether or not they continue to research ethics for their theses.

The Applied Ethics template, which is in the Appendix, provides students with a range of projects for HBC consideration. Students can select from 1) a traditional applied ethics research project, 2) a case study analysis, or 3) a case study composition. The template also explains the specific assessments used for completing the HBC and integrates the research skills described above. In the end, the template provides students with a sufficient amount of guidance in ethical theory to analyze a problem in their major or an interdisciplinary field of interest. It also encourages them to reflect on the research process itself and to consider how they might expand the HBC work into a thesis project.

### **HBC RESEARCH HUBS**

In addition to templates, our honors program has created strategic partnerships with campus institutes and centers to manage an increasing volume of HBC proposals. The rationale for these research hubs is essentially the same as for the template: to provide direction while allowing students research autonomy. Furthermore, hubs differentiate the HBC from other undergraduate academic work and encourage students to see undergraduate research as part of a process that entails a wide range of problems and the theoretical tools to solve them. To this end, we have even in some cases partnered with outside organizations and corporations. Like many mid-size campuses, Marist has a wide range of research centers and institutes housed in different schools and programs, including the Marist Institute for Public Opinion, the Center for Ethics, the Center for Sports Communication, the IBM-Marist Joint Study, and the Raymond A. Rich Institute for Leadership Development. HBC hubs are built around partnerships that create ongoing opportunities for honors students to work on HBC-related research projects. We currently sponsor hub-based research at five campus centers and institutes. These relationships have grown organically on our campus, with honors students applying their critical knowledge and skills to the production of concrete deliverables for a particular center or institute. While we have not yet formally developed hubs

in the natural sciences, students have completed a variety of HBCs with faculty in our genetics labs.

Like traditional HBC projects, hub work occurs under the supervision of a faculty mentor, and the hubs have been created with an apprenticeship model of faculty-student mentoring in mind. This model generally takes place in a team setting, with labs and fieldwork being the most traditional context for hub research. Steven Engel finds no evidence that structured curricula like thesis seminars support honors student research, at least when measured across the following six learning dimensions: knowledge synthesis, information and literacy skills, interaction and communication skills, professional development, professional advancement, and personal development (120). An apprenticeship model for undergraduate research, Engel argues, demonstrates stronger learning gains than either a structured curriculum or a complete lack of structure (121). By choosing a hub over an open HBC or template, students relinquish some flexibility and autonomy to determine the scope of their projects since hub projects are all pre-existing. Nonetheless, students often benefit from the clear scope of these projects, and they build knowledge and skillsets similar to those of students engaged in more traditional or template HBC experiences. In fact, hubs are an increasingly important part of our HBC offerings: 15% of HBC projects completed in fall 2018 alone were part of our hubs. Similarly, our consistent requirements and outcomes for all HBC work—students register for credit, faculty are compensated, and all contracts adhere to credit-hour guidelines—guarantee an authentic honors experience for both students and faculty.

Three examples will help to illustrate the use of hubs on our campus. Whether engaged in hubs at the Center for Sports Communication, the Raymond A. Rich Institute for Leadership Development, or the Abaarso School of Science and Technology in Somaliland, students from different majors, including mathematics, education, and business, work together on team solutions to address specific problems. We have found that both on- and off-campus organizations are interested in including honors students in their projects. For example, our colleague Leander Schaerlaeckens,

Assistant Director of the Center for Sports Communication at Marist, has indicated that HBC experiences through research hubs “provide a baseline of accountability and academic rigor that we’ve had good results with.” Schaerlaeckens hopes to “incorporate more honors students into our work to tackle anything from crafting a social media strategy for the Center to doing a deep-dive podcast series on a relevant subject in the industry we serve.” Daniella Sesto (all students’ names are used with their permission), a junior majoring in political science who completed her HBC with the Raymond A. Rich Institute for Leadership Development, reports that her HBC “has been one of the most enriching experiences of my academic career.” The HBC had special value for her because it was “established without the restriction of a class topic,” and she was therefore “allowed . . . fluidity in revising and refocusing my research based on the information gathered throughout the semester.” Sofia Santos, a business major who served as the project manager for the Abaarso School HBC Research Hub in fall 2018, similarly explains that she, as project manager,

was tasked with organizing and arranging meeting times, as well as facilitating communication within the group and with our advisors; I oversaw quality control and the completion of group tasks and kept both the group [and] the advisors overseeing the project updated on progress and goals that needed to be accomplished.

Through this HBC focused on the production of Somali-language educational videos, Santos “learned important communication, organization, and time management skills that allowed this project to be successful.” In the end, our HBC research hubs provide both direction and a rigorous academic experience to students who otherwise might not know how to complete the HBC requirement. We believe that these hubs will become an increasingly important part of our HBC curriculum moving forward.

## CONCLUSION

The HBC appears to be here to stay. It is also unlikely, at least at Marist, that the HBC experience will ever be perfectly defined in its nature and scope of requirements. Templates and research hubs, however, clarify the process by inviting students to tackle important research problems in a developmental manner. They also create the opportunity for students to build relationships that will be critical to their success during and after college. In the end, this type of academic work is connected with the short- and long-term success of our honors students. The Marist College Honors Program is therefore committed to supporting a wide range of potential HBC projects for its students, and templates and research hubs have in a short time become important ways of flexibly structuring our HBC offerings.

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## APPENDIX

## Marist College Honors Program Template Model for Applied Ethics

### HONORS BY CONTRACT IN APPLIED ETHICS

All academic majors and fields of study—from biochemistry to political science—raise important ethical problems and questions. Ethical theories are used to analyze questions and problems about what is right and good. Today there are three dominant ethical theories: Deontology, Consequentialism, and Virtue Ethics. Deontology emphasizes the rightness and wrongness of certain intentions and actions, no matter what the consequences. Consequentialism claims that values depend on producing certain consequences and avoiding others, for example, pleasure and pain. Virtue Ethics focuses instead on big questions related to happiness and the well-being of one's character. Each theory will answer questions or solve ethical problems differently.

For the Applied Ethics Honors by Contract project, students are required to first select a *primary field of study*. The chosen field of study will be the focus of the applied ethics project or the case study work.

#### Honors by Contract Applied Ethics Projects

For the Honors by Contract in Applied Ethics, students are directed to three potential HBC projects. Students are expected to select one of the following projects:

- 1. Applied Ethics Project:** For this contract students must research a topic, problem, or question in the primary field of study. The topic, problem, or question will be analyzed using at least one of the following theories: (a) Deontology, (b) Utilitarianism, and (c) Virtue Ethics.
- 2. Case Study Analysis:** For this contract project students will select a case study in their primary field of study. Students will then compose their own analysis of the case using each of the following theories: (a) Deontology, (b) Utilitarianism, and (c) Virtue Ethics.
- 3. Case Study Composition:** For this contract project students will write their own ethical case study and provide an analysis using at least one of the following ethical theories: (a) Deontology, (b) Utilitarianism, and (c) Virtue Ethics.

#### Honors by Contract Assessment

Applied Ethics Honors by Contract students are required to complete and submit the following assessments:

1. **Honors by Contract Project:** Students are required to submit a final project for the Honors by Contract Applied Ethics project. The final project must include the following:
  - a. Applied Ethics Project, Case Study Analysis, or Case Study Composition
  - b. Annotated Bibliography
2. **Public Presentation:** All Honors by Contract students are expected to present their research to their peers. This presentation can take place either in the classroom or in an Honors-sponsored event, like the Honors Research Forum.
3. **Research Journal:** All Applied Ethics Contract students are required to keep a journal that reflects upon the research process itself. The journal should focus on the process of discovery, identifying topics, arguments, and positions of interest, as well as time management.

## Resources

### *Ethical Theory*

- Consequentialism: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism>>
- Deontological Ethics: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-deontological>>
- Virtue Ethics: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue>>

### *Finding Research*

- <<http://libguides.marist.edu/c.php?g=87332&p=2545179>>

### *Annotated Bibliographies*

- <<http://guides.library.cornell.edu/annotatedbibliography>>
- <<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/03>>

### *CITI Certification*

- <<https://about.citiprogram.org/en/homepage>>
- <<https://www.citiprogram.org/?pageID=668>>

### *Evaluating Research*

- Triangulation: <<http://www.jeffbloom.net/docs/RigorInQuantQual-Triangulation.pdf>>
- <<http://www.umuc.edu/current-students/learning-resources/writing-center/online-guide-to-writing/tutorial/chapter4/ch4-05.html>>
- <<https://www.vtpi.org/resqual.pdf>>

**HONORS BY CONTRACT IN APPLIED ETHICS FORM**

This form must be completed and submitted to the Honors Program Director by the end of the third week of the semester.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Professor \_\_\_\_\_

Semester/Year \_\_\_\_\_

HBC Project Abstract (250–500 words) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What are the learning outcomes expected from this contract?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Will your project require the use of human subjects? If so, explain:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please provide a timeline for completion of the project:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I agree to (*student initials before each statement to indicate understanding and agreement with the terms*):

\_\_\_\_\_ Complete an exploratory study that includes the elements discussed with my HBC mentor: 1) completed applied ethics project, case study analysis, or case study composition; 2) annotated bibliography that demonstrates knowledge of and competency in best practices of annotated bib development, as well as validating the rigor of the literature reviewed; and 3) development of conclusion with findings, goals, action steps, and a timeline for work moving toward my honors thesis.

\_\_\_\_\_ Complete the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certification in research ethics and compliance.

\_\_\_\_\_ Keep a reflective journal in order to document the process and identify topics of interest, as well as to evaluate my time-management skills.

\_\_\_\_\_ Communicate with my HBC mentor via iLearn messaging/email and periodic meetings (in-person, WebEx) as agreed to in my HBC contract with the Honors Program Director.

Student signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Professor signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Ensuring a Quality Honors Experience through Learning Contracts: Success beyond Our Wildest Dreams

JULIA A. HASELEU AND LAURIE A. TAYLOR  
MADISON COLLEGE

In 1997, when Julia A. Haseleu started teaching at Kirkwood Community College (KCC) in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, her charge as a psychology instructor with honors experience was to develop an honors program based on learning contracts. Other faculty and administrators had attempted to offer honors courses at KCC, but these efforts had failed. Rhonda Kekke, KCC Dean of Arts and Humanities, determined that the problem was the honors course format. At small to medium-sized colleges and universities, especially two-year campuses, finding a group of honors students who are interested in the same subjects, able to work the same courses into their schedules, and synchronized enough across courses to justify a full honors curriculum in any given semester is often difficult. Kekke was convinced that it would be better to use an honors

project format, and she was right. Now, twenty years later, Haseleu has developed two such programs at two flagship two-year colleges in two midwestern states: first at KCC and then at her current institution, Madison College in Madison, Wisconsin.

In Chapter One of this volume, Richard Badenhausen outlines and discusses the problems and pitfalls of using learning contracts, especially as “add-ons” to non-honors courses or in lieu of formal honors classes. Badenhausen comes from the perspective of one who leads a “fully developed and flexible stand-alone honors curriculum” (6), an environment in which learning contracts understandably would not be the first choice—or even necessary—as a way of developing an honors curriculum. In smaller programs, however, with a much wider variety of departments, programs, and disciplines (e.g., liberal arts, automotive technology, dental hygiene, business and marketing, construction, culinary arts, engineering, protective services, graphic design, information technology, music, nursing, welding, and veterinary technician), offering an ongoing course-based honors curriculum is often not possible. In such cases, a project-based approach that is structured with comprehensive learning contracts is a flexible way to give students honors-level learning experiences in lieu of honors classes. This situation existed at both KCC and Madison College.

In project-based learning, students develop a question to explore and are guided through the research and analysis process under the supervision of a faculty member. Project-based learning is neither a supplemental activity nor an “add-on” to a traditional course. Rather, it is the basis of the curriculum in and of itself (Bell 39). Students who engage in project-based learning experience a deeper level of learning and understanding about a topic and enjoy greater opportunity to hone problem-solving and critical-thinking skills than they would in a more passive learning environment.

Active learning only occurs, of course, in well-designed projects. Kokotsaki, Menzies, and Wiggins have reviewed the project-based learning literature and made several recommendations for effective project-based learning, including not only that students must be guided and supported effectively, but also that evidence of student

progress must be regularly monitored and assessed (267–77). These key factors, along with mechanisms to ensure that students experience the same quality and intellectual rigor in their project-based learning as in more traditional honors courses, can easily be introduced via quality-assurance mechanisms included in learning contracts. As Theresa A. James states in her seminal work, *A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges* (2006), “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” (30).

“By definition,” according to Badenhausen, honors contracts are “ad hoc arrangements, and consequently, they operate outside conventional curricular checks and balances that seek to ensure quality in a student’s learning experience” (13). In his recent work, Bahls also discusses the hesitance of some faculty members and administrators to employ learning contracts because “contracts may lead to a dilution of the academic or intellectual rigor one would expect to find in an honors-designated course section” (172). Countering some of these arguments against learning contracts, this chapter makes the case for learning contracts based on some of the honors program successes as well as the learning opportunities that Haseleu has experienced at Madison College. We argue that building specific quality-assurance mechanisms into learning contracts can mitigate any potential loss of intellectual rigor and provide the same or similar checks and balances as those structured into more “traditional” honors courses (Bahls 173; Gaffney-Rhys and Jones 711–25). Students can and should be encouraged to discover the academic value and benefits of this form of honors project-based learning.

## **MADISON COLLEGE HONORS PROGRAM OVERVIEW**

Madison College is a comprehensive community college with eight regional campuses that serve the southcentral district in Wisconsin. Each year, the college enrolls approximately 35,000 students, which translates into roughly 9,000 FTEs across the district (“2016–2017 Enrollment”; “2015–2016 Academic”). Honors at

Madison College is a college-wide, project-based program designed to provide an enriching educational experience for students who have demonstrated academic excellence and who seek challenging opportunities beyond the standard curriculum. Some institutions choose to supplement their honors curricula with honors contracts linked to specific non-honors courses, allowing students to delve more deeply into course content by completing alternative projects or assignments related to the course. (See Bahls and DiLauro, Meyers, and Guertin.) Although honors project credits are offered in each of the participating departments, programs, and disciplines at Madison College, the honors projects themselves are stand-alone academic offerings and are not linked to other courses. These honors projects comprise the entirety of Madison College's honors curriculum.

Qualified students work with an honors supervising faculty member over the course of a semester to develop a two- or three-credit honors project in the faculty member's discipline. Since the launch of the honors program in 2014, we have trained 286 honors faculty members and have had 610 students participate in the program. Our faculty and students come from 80 different departments, programs, and disciplines (approximately 75% of the programs eligible to offer honors credits). Students can participate in the honors program if they have earned a 3.5 or higher cumulative GPA and have completed at least 12 degree credits at Madison College, or if they are incoming high school students with a cumulative GPA of 3.5 or higher and a letter of recommendation from a high school teacher or guidance counselor.

## **LEARNING CONTRACT QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS**

Based on Haseleu's success with learning contracts in the KCC Honors Program, she proposed their introduction at Madison College. In developing the format and content of these contracts, the Honors Initiative Committee, composed of faculty and administrators from across disciplines, spent most of a year meeting with key stakeholders, including faculty, staff, and administrators from different departments, programs, and disciplines; staff from the

student services, enrollment, and advising areas; and union officers. We discussed what the honors program would need to include in the learning contract to provide the necessary framework for educational experiences that met the academic standards set forth by the Wisconsin Technical College System. In addition, we agreed on the importance of designing a learning contract flexible enough to accommodate a variety of departments, programs, and disciplines and to account for projects based in STEM fields, the social sciences, the humanities, business, health, and several career and technical programs.

Much has been written about learning contracts as faculty-student agreements that mediate expectations, learning objectives, and methods of assessment. (See in particular Bolch; Bone; Goodman and Beenen; Klimoski; Lemieux; and MacDonald.) Using this research as a baseline, we developed our learning contract framework in much the same way one would design a course. For example, in his review of principles for effective course design, Whetten first identifies characteristics that foster learning and then emphasizes the importance of aligning those characteristics to produce coherent and complete learning experiences for students (339–57). Below we connect each of these characteristics to our requirements for contracted honors projects:

- **Activities Fostering Active, Engaged Learning:** The honors project must be of interest and personally relevant to the student. As the subject-matter expert, the supervising faculty member provides guidance and mentorship, but the student is the active learner who completes all facets of the project.
- **Explicit Learning Objectives:** Supervising faculty members must clearly specify what they expect students to learn and what students should be able to do upon completion of the honors project. The faculty member and student also should agree upon the final product of the project.
- **Valid Assessment of Student Learning:** Supervising faculty members should use appropriate measures to determine whether the learning objectives were achieved. Measures

should correspond to the skillset learned and the final product produced.

Similarly, in discussing the development of learning contracts, Daniela Brecko considers many of the same characteristics, adding the following two elements, once again connected to our requirements for contracted honors projects (257–71):

- **Relevant Learning Need:** The supervising faculty member and student should mutually determine what the student wants to learn, could learn, and should learn.
- **Useful Resources and Strategies for Learning:** The supervising faculty member should help the student identify and secure the necessary resources to complete the honors project. The faculty member and student must also articulate specific activities, such as weekly meetings, to facilitate learning and project completion.

The Madison College Honors Project Learning Contract form, included in the Appendix, illustrates how we incorporated each of these course- and contract-design characteristics to ensure high-quality learning experiences and outstanding honors projects. Each contract requires eleven key pieces of information that collectively define the honors project, including what will be accomplished, when it will be accomplished, what the learning objectives are and how they will be measured, and what the final outcome and product will be. These key components of the learning contract are required for all projects regardless of the department, program, or discipline in which they are based. The components of our contracts are described in further detail below.

## Number of Credits

Honors students may enroll in two or three honors project credits per learning contract, and the number of honors credits taken by the student must be specified on the contract. Students may enroll in more than one honors project within a single semester, and they may also enroll in projects in more than one discipline. To graduate

with honors, students must complete between four and six honors project credits (two or three distinct projects) with a minimum AB average grade. Students can enroll in up to six honors project credits total during their time at Madison College. The credits will count toward the student's degree if the student earns a passing grade on the honors project. In order for the credits to count toward the completion of the honors program, however, the student must earn an AB average across all completed honors projects.

We also indicate on the Honors Project Learning Contract that each honors credit requires approximately 51 hours of work, a guideline we received from the Wisconsin Technical College System. The FAQs that we regularly distribute to students and faculty explain this requirement in more detail. By specifying the number of credits taken, we give the student a clear idea of the amount of work expected. These credits also guide the design of the honors project itself by clarifying the scope of the project.

## **Project Start and Completion Dates**

Also on the learning contract, specific dates define a concrete timeline, allowing the student and supervising faculty member to create a more detailed project work plan with dates for milestones and benchmarks to be achieved on the way to project completion. As proposed by Dilauro, Meyers, and Guertin, an honors project can span multiple semesters as long as the work each semester results in a product that can be graded as a stand-alone section of the larger project (109–15). A separate learning contract must be submitted each semester for each section of a multi-semester project.

## **Project Description**

The brief project description and learning contract title appear on official college documents such as enrollment forms and transcripts. A longer, one-page description of the project may also be included. These descriptions allow the honors director, honors advisory committee, and deans to review the proposed honors project for alignment with the college mission and vision, the student's

educational program plan, and the Wisconsin Technical College System standards.

### **Eligibility for Honors Project**

This section asks the student and supervising faculty member to verify the student's eligibility to participate in the honors program. The honors supervising faculty member and the honors director check eligibility to ensure that only qualified students participate in the program and earn honors credits.

### **Learning Objectives**

After consulting with the student about the proposed project, the supervising faculty member determines appropriate learning objectives, based not only on what the student wants to gain from the project, but also on what the student could or should learn from completing such a project. The learning objectives are often driven by the final goals of the project, such as developing specific skills, increasing knowledge of a topic, or finding solutions to real-world problems of interest to the student. This section is one of the most important on the learning contract since it clearly delineates what the faculty mentor expects of the student, what the student will achieve, and what specifically the student's educational experience will entail.

### **Criteria for Evaluating the Honors Project**

The criteria for evaluating the honors project and the methods of assessment must correspond directly to the learning objectives and align with the skills and knowledge to be gained. This section indicates the project's final outcome or product, and the supervising faculty member describes the parts of the project to be graded and the percentage of the overall grade determined by each part. Supervising faculty members are encouraged to include a copy of the grading rubric to be used, if applicable, and must use an A-to-F grading scale. The honors supervising faculty member is solely responsible for determining whether the honors student has met

the honors learning objectives and outcomes outlined in the learning contract and for assigning a final grade.

### **Required Meetings, Conferences, or Other Activities**

Using the brief list of required activities in this section as a guide, all supervising faculty members and their students must meet weekly to keep the student on track and to ensure the supervising faculty member's ongoing assessment and review of the project.

### **Textbooks and Other Required Materials**

This section lists resources that the student needs to complete the project. Some resources may be available on campus at no cost. When students indicate on their contracts a need for resources, such as supplies, materials, or equipment, that are unavailable on campus, the honors director or supervising faculty member directs them to an application for a small materials scholarship that is available through the Madison College Honors Program.

### **Honors Projects Requiring Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval**

To ensure that we follow federal guidelines regarding research involving human or animal subjects, we have developed a process in collaboration with the Madison College IRB for honors projects requiring such approval. Students indicate on the learning contract whether their project involves human or animal subjects. For those projects involving data collection with human subjects, the student must first spend one semester completing a literature review on the topic and developing the research materials, such as interview questions and an informed consent form. In the subsequent semester, the student may collect data. The learning contract includes a section requiring students to certify that they have completed the preliminary literature review; they must also include copies of the research materials they produced as part of their first-semester project (e.g., surveys, instructions to participants, and planned methods for analyzing results). To ensure faculty expertise

in overseeing research involving human subjects or animals, the supervising faculty member must include a completed checklist of faculty research experience with the learning contract.

The honors faculty committee reviews the learning contract as well as all IRB-related materials submitted with the contract and is responsible for approving the learning contract itself. Upon approval, the honors director forwards the learning contract and research materials to the IRB committee for review. The honors committee defers to the IRB for final approval of the research and required materials for projects involving human subjects. Once the student earns both levels of approval, the research itself may begin. Honors projects involving human subjects are always conducted under the ongoing oversight of the IRB committee.

### **Required Certifications**

All honors students are required to submit a copy of their final honors project to the director at the end of the semester, and all learning contracts ask students and faculty to certify their understanding of this requirement. This certification not only ensures completion of the work, but it also verifies the grading and approval of the final product by the supervising faculty member. The learning contract is retained by the honors program as a permanent record for students, faculty, the honors program, the college, and the Wisconsin Technical College System.

### **Required Signatures**

In keeping with the principles outlined in Theresa A. James's *A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges*, we require signatures on all learning contracts by the student, supervising faculty member, the faculty member's dean, and the honors program director (79–108). This process ensures complete oversight and approval of the project and contract as proposed. If any signing party has questions or concerns about the project or contract, that person may send it back to the supervising faculty member and student to revise. Once all parties have signed the learning contract,

it is sent to the honors committee for review and approval. Students cannot begin working on their projects until they earn honors committee approval.

## **OTHER QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS RELATED TO THE LEARNING CONTRACT**

To support the specific quality-assurance mechanisms built into our honors learning contracts, the Madison College Honors Program has developed three key initiatives, described in more detail below: honors faculty training workshops, honors faculty stipends, and an honors competition where students present their honors projects.

### **Honors Faculty Workshops**

All full- and part-time faculty interested in serving as honors supervising faculty members must first complete an honors faculty workshop. These four-hour workshops cover a variety of topics, including the history of honors programs, the benefits of student participation in honors, the strategies for recruiting and supervising honors students, the process of developing an honors project, and the requirements for completing all sections of a learning contract. By providing comprehensive training to supervising faculty members, which includes detailed instructions on how to complete a learning contract as well as a sample learning contract for their reference, we ensure that our students' project-based honors educational experiences will be of the same caliber, quality, and intellectual rigor as traditional honors courses. Although faculty are not compensated for attending the workshop, completion of the workshop does count toward their licensure and required professional development training.

## **Faculty Stipends**

The Madison College Honors Program pays supervising faculty members a stipend of \$500 for each honors student supervised, regardless of the number of honors project credits in which the student is enrolled. The honors faculty member can supervise up to three students per semester. The stipend amounts are equal across all departments, programs, disciplines, and faculty ranks (including both full- and part-time faculty) to promote equity among supervising faculty members.

## **Honors Competition**

Our honors program holds an Honors Competition event at the end of each fall and spring semester. Students can present their honors projects to members of the Madison College community and a panel of judges, which includes faculty, staff, and administrators from across the college. The first-, second-, and third-place winners receive a trophy, cash award, and financial support to present their honors projects at the next Upper-Midwest Regional Honors Council Conference. Many supervising faculty members incorporate this competitive event into their evaluation criteria on the learning contract. In such cases, participation in the competition is one of the final products the students must complete to meet their learning objectives. In discussing one of the drawbacks of learning contracts, Badenhausen argues: “We do our students no favors by establishing curricular practices that separate them from their honors peers . . .” (10). By holding an honors competition each semester, however, we provide our students with an important venue for networking with faculty, receiving feedback on their projects, and interacting with other honors students who share their project-based experience.

## **IMPACT OF LEARNING CONTRACTS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

The decision to develop a project-based honors curriculum at Madison College meant that from the start we needed a detailed

learning contract framework for the projects, thoughtful supervision and evaluation by faculty, and a process to ensure a high-quality educational experience for honors students. By designing contracts in much the same way as one would design a traditional honors course, we were able to verify that the students and supervising faculty members had a mutual and clear understanding of what the project would entail, what was expected of the student and faculty member, and what the project outcomes would be. In addition, we created some checks and balances to ensure that the student's project-based honors educational experience was of the same caliber, quality, and intellectual rigor as other traditional coursework taken at Madison College.

For the most part, the learning contracts have been viewed positively by those participating in the honors program, with approximately 96% of students and faculty responding to a bi-annual survey rating the experience as "very useful." Comments from the supervising faculty members focus on the value of contracts in producing clear learning outcomes and careful oversight. One professor, for example, remarks, "It is extremely important to document the expectations and outcomes to ensure the criteria are met. This offers a process to mentor students [and] to keep them focused and working toward a specified set of goals and expectations." Another sees the learning contract as protection against potential problems: "It is good to have the contract as it is a great guideline to abide by. I have never experienced any abuses throughout my two honors project experiences, but I can see how the contract may mitigate against such an abuse." A third sees the contract as a useful starting point for mentoring: "I feel that the learning contract gives both the student and the advisor a foundation to build the project. The student can refer to the contract for the grading expectations, the depth of the project, and the timeline." In each case, mentors valued the rigor and format of our process.

In addition to these positive responses, another measure of the success and impact of our learning-contract process has been the caliber and outcomes of the honors students' projects and the directions in which these projects ultimately took them. For instance, a

mathematics honors student received a scholarship and was admitted as a full-time student in chemical engineering at Yale University, in part because of his published honors project. An honors student studying electronics created an electronic weather relay device that recorded the coldest temperatures ever documented on earth; this device was later installed in weather stations in Antarctica by his supervising faculty member. As a follow-up, the student created a second version of his device and recently traveled to Antarctica himself to install it at the weather stations. An engineering honors student was selected to attend a workshop at Langley Air Force Base for students interested in an internship at NASA. A student in the Gender and Women's Studies program presented her honors research on women in Zimbabwe at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women 61: Women's Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work. Several other honors students have presented their work at professional conferences or had their work published in peer-reviewed professional journals.

Students contribute not only to their global and national communities but also to the local community through their work. One economics honors student conducted research on which buses were the most cost-effective and environmentally responsive and then presented his findings to the Madison mayor and his staff. A business management student received the Outreach Organization of the Year award for Transliberation Art Coalition, an organization he created to heighten visibility and to empower members of the transgender and gender-nonconforming community as part of his honors project. The success of these projects has helped many of our honors students to secure full-time employment, scholarships, or internships.

Based on our experience at Madison College, we see four key advantages to learning contracts. First, they are adaptable to a wide variety of disciplines and project types. With eighty participating departments, programs, and disciplines, we needed a tool to accommodate the varied academic, professional, and creative goals of our students and faculty. Second, contracts require the supervising faculty member and student to think through the project thoroughly

before beginning work. By establishing logistics, expectations, outcomes, and the timeline of the project beforehand, students are more likely to succeed and have higher quality, more meaningful educational experiences with clearly defined and useful outcomes. Third, the learning contract serves as the official documentation initiating the student's enrollment process into the honors program. Upon submission to the honors program director's office, the learning contract triggers a paperwork chain related to enrollment, course creation, financial aid, and tuition charges. The contract then provides a written record of the student's participation in the honors program and documentation of the completed honors project. Finally, the learning contract also reminds all parties of the original project idea. Over the course of the semester, students and faculty can lose track of that initial idea as they pursue tangential lines of research. To earn credit, the project must stay reasonably true to the original idea as outlined in the approved learning contract.

Lest we leave readers with the impression that the development and implementation of our learning contract process was all wine and roses, we should mention that we did encounter several challenges along the way. The version of the learning contract included in the Appendix is the fifth, not the first, iteration. Over the course of four years, we have modified the contract several times in response to feedback from supervising faculty members, students, program coordinators, and administrators seeking clarity on some aspects of the form. In addition, the honors committee found that earlier versions did not provide sufficient information to review and approve the honors projects. The current version of the learning contract has been in use for the last year, and it seems to be working as intended. Based on these experiences, we highly recommend flexible, carefully mentored learning contracts built upon solid project frameworks and clear learning outcomes. The implementation of such learning contracts has allowed our honors students, faculty, and the program itself to enjoy success beyond our wildest dreams.

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APPENDIX

**Madison College Honors Project Learning Contract**

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

Student Madison College I.D. \_\_\_\_\_

Student Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Credits (2-3) (1 credit = 51 hrs) \_\_\_\_\_

Supervising Honors Faculty \_\_\_\_\_

Faculty Discipline Area \_\_\_\_\_

Supervising Dean \_\_\_\_\_

Catalog # \_\_\_\_\_

Project Start Date \_\_\_\_\_ Project Completion Date \_\_\_\_\_

Campus where project will be completed

- Madison-Truax       Madison-Commercial Avenue       Madison-South
- Madison-West       Fort Atkinson       Portage
- Reedsburg       Watertown       Online

Title of Project (limit 30 characters with spaces) \_\_\_\_\_

Description of Honors Project (limit 211 characters with spaces)

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*Note: An optional 1-page description of the project can be included with the Learning Contract.*

**Eligibility for Honors Project:**

Completed by Student and Honors Supervising Faculty Member

(check all that apply):

- The student has a cumulative GPA of 3.5 or higher from Madison College.
- The student has completed a minimum of 12 college degree credits.
- (For incoming high school students only) The student has a cumulative High School GPA of 3.5 or higher.
- The student has received Instructor permission.

Completed by Honors Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_ Cum. GPA      \_\_\_\_\_ # Credits

**Learning Objectives**—Must be completed by the Honors Supervising Faculty Member (please be specific):

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**Criteria for Evaluating the Honors Project**—Must be completed by the Honors Supervising Faculty Member (please include a breakdown of the % of the overall grade for each project component; these should align with the Learning Objectives above; you may also attach a grading rubric):

*A to F grading scale:*

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**Required Meetings, Conferences, or Other Activities:**

*Weekly meetings:*

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**Textbooks and Other Required Materials:**

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**For Honors Projects that Require Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval:**

- I plan to conduct research involving human subjects for my Honors Project (e.g., observations, interviews, surveys) and will not begin collecting data until I obtain approval from the Madison College Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**Required materials to include with the Learning Contract:**

- I have completed a literature review as a previous Honors Project on this topic.
- I have attached the Honors Faculty Research Experience Checklist.
- I have attached a copy of the Informed Consent Form for the Honors Project.
- My Honors Project involves survey research. I have attached a copy of the interview questions to be asked.

*Note: For an example of an Informed Consent Form and further information about the policies and procedures for Honors Projects involving human subjects, please see the Institutional Review Board section on the Honors Program website.*

All required materials must first be submitted to the Honors Program Director, who will submit them to the Honors Advisory Committee for review and approval. Once approved, the Honors Program Director then will forward the materials to the IRB Committee for their review and approval.

- I plan to conduct research involving animals in my Honors Project. (Please contact the Honors Program Director for instructions and information prior to collecting data.)

**Required Certifications:**

- I understand that I am responsible for providing a final copy of my Honors Project to the Honors Program Director at the end of the semester. (Contact the Honors Program Director to work out the details for submission of non-paper Honors Projects.)
- I understand that my photo, likeness, or name may be used for appropriate marketing and recruitment purposes for the Honors Program, including inclusion in annual reports, brochures, posters, and the Honors Program website.
  - I give the Honors Program and Madison College permission to use my photo, likeness, or name and will make no monetary or other claim of any kind for the appropriate use of these materials.
  - I do not give the Honors Program or Madison College permission to use my photo, likeness, or name for marketing, recruitment, or other purposes.

**Required Signatures:**

You must have the proper signatures below before enrolling in the Honors Program.

Student \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Honors Supervising Faculty Member \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dean \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Honors Program Director \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Submit the completed Learning Contract to the Administrative staff in the Honors Supervising Faculty Member's Dean's office.*

## CHAPTER NINE

# A High-Impact Strategy for Honors Contract Courses

GARY WYATT

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

### INTRODUCTION

This essay describes a strategy implemented at Emporia State University for offering high-impact honors contract courses in a collaborative environment. After considering the role of honors contract courses in our college, the chapter demonstrates the importance of guiding students and instructors in creating contract applications and shaping requirements to ensure that contract courses are true honors experiences. Our contract applications demand a collaborative effort in which students and instructors demonstrate together how core requirements will be satisfied. Each application is unique and generally involves the development of a mentoring relationship. The chapter includes examples illustrating some key value-added outcomes students can and should expect

from contracts, as well as assessment data supporting this strategy and suggestions to deans and directors interested in implementing a similar approach in their honors curricula.

Emporia State University (ESU) is a regional public institution located in east-central Kansas. It is one of seven public universities in the Kansas Board of Regents System. Founded in 1863, ESU currently has an enrollment of 4,493 full-time-equivalent undergraduate and graduate students. The honors college, which has a theme of adaptive leadership and community engagement, was founded by legislative action in 2014, and it became fully operational in the fall of 2015. Prior to the honors college, ESU had a much smaller honors program that was founded in the early 1980s. The honors college currently enrolls 165 students, about 25 of whom complete the program and graduate “With Honors” or “With High Honors” each academic year. Honors contract courses are an essential part of the honors experience, and most graduates have completed at least one.

Honors contract courses provide one of the most practical ways to deliver an honors curriculum in an environment of mounting pressure to graduate students quickly and with minimal debt. In the state of Kansas, for example, new regulations by the Kansas Board of Regents stipulate that, with precious few exceptions, baccalaureate degrees cannot exceed 120 credits (“Academic Affairs”). Many other institutions in other states face similar restrictions and pressures. While the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) recommends that 20% of the academic curriculum is composed of honors courses, meeting that requirement is becoming difficult in the current environment for at least two reasons: first, college credits earned in high school; second, the cost of staffing upper-division, program-specific honors courses (“Basic Characteristics”). In the fall of 2017, 81% of newly admitted students in Emporia State’s Honors College completed an average of 21 credits of general education courses while still in high school, while only 19% had not completed any general education credits, a statistic comparable with other research (Coleman and Patton; Guzy). As Hageman (81–82), Bambina (104), and Haseleu and Taylor (173–74) have suggested in

this volume, offering honors courses later in the curriculum poses similar problems at resource-challenged institutions, since enrollments in upper-division, program-specific classes are typically very low and thus difficult to justify. These realities leave honors contract courses as perhaps the most practical curriculum-delivery option at many institutions, particularly for upper-division students.

Despite the practicality of contracts, concerns remain about both their quality and delivery of a true honors experience. The paucity of research on contracts means, however, that such concerns have too often been based on anecdotal evidence shared informally by directors, deans, and students. We are indebted in this regard to Richard Badenhausen, whose carefully researched opening chapter gives thoughtful and reasoned voice to a number of important concerns about honors contracts. While he understands that contracts often result from real and difficult curricular problems, the contributors to this volume all recognize that he is right to warn against their potential misuse.

Clearly, the need for contracts does not ensure their quality, and honors educators have the responsibility to eliminate underdeveloped honors contracts that dilute rather than enrich the academic experiences of students. Overworked instructors may agree to contracts but then require little more than completion of extra assignments with minimal instructor-student interaction. Badenhausen rightly cautions readers against an honors education reduced through contracts to additional work alone; rather, this education must be an intentional, collaborative effort (7–8). He is also justifiably wary about the isolated circumstances of some contracts, which undermine the essentially collaborative nature of the honors community (10–11). Fortunately, however, contracts can be both intentional and collaborative. Indeed, Badenhausen makes the case that it is not the *use* but the *misuse* of contracts that causes these problems, and he helpfully articulates a set of concerns that, if addressed, can serve as quality control for successful contracts. Throughout this chapter, I refer to his concerns to demonstrate a strategy that ESU uses to address them.

As students reflect on their experiences with contracts and as assessment data are reviewed, the collaborative nature of this effort becomes clear. Our contracts address one of Badenhausen's concerns by ensuring that they are completed not in isolation but in relationships between students and instructors in regular (typically weekly) meetings. Moreover, the culture of ESU embraces the honors college as part of campus life. While I appreciate Badenhausen's emphasis on the distinctive educational experience of traditional honors courses, this narrow definition can lead to charges of elitism and segregation if honors students, who increasingly tend to be upper-middle-class, white, and female, become insulated from the general student population in an honors curricular bubble. The contract approach allows students to learn in an inclusive campus-wide environment while still engaging in an honors curriculum and community.

Furthermore, ESU's honors curriculum is not just taught by a limited number of designated honors faculty. While we exclude graduate teaching assistants, honors faculty at Emporia State include all motivated tenure-line and non-tenure-line faculty members with the desire to mentor honors students and the willingness to meet the shared requirements, outlined in this essay, for traditional and contract honors courses. This inclusive pedagogical practice opens the curriculum to a wide array of faculty who become stakeholders in honors. I believe these curricular practices have led to greater acceptance of and appreciation for the honors college on our campus.

The job of the honors program or college is to focus and direct this faculty enthusiasm with clear learning outcomes. The problem of intentionality that Badenhausen identifies became clear to me soon after I was appointed dean of ESU's new honors college (14). Colleagues expressed interest in and enthusiasm for teaching honors courses, but when asked to define an honors course and articulate its difference from other courses, faculty struggled to answer. Watching this struggle was an important experience for me. If the best they could offer was that an honors course would be more rigorous than other courses or would enroll more enthusiastic students eager to attend and participate, the honors college had some work to do.

Laying a foundation for this work, I took some time to tour a number of honors programs and colleges and to interview directors, deans, and students, but I was surprised to find that many of them also struggled, claiming that honors courses were defined by the faculty teaching them. One honors dean offered me his experience as a cautionary tale: “We’ve lost control here. Get in front of the question about what an honors course is before you lose control as well. Lay down requirements up front and stick with them, or there will be little clarity about what an honors course is or isn’t.” I took his advice to heart in framing an honors curriculum that includes a range of different kinds of coursework, concluding that while contract courses are not perfect, traditional honors courses have their problems as well. Although this essay focuses on contracts, I argue that both contract and traditional honors courses need the same foundational guidance from honors colleges or programs to realize their full educational potential.

### **KEY PARTS OF A CONTRACT COURSE**

This effort to define honors courses reminds me of the need for researchers to define the variables they study and to articulate relationships and distinguish between key parts of their research. The same holds true for honors courses: we needed to define the key parts of any honors curricular experience clearly. For direction in this undertaking, I turned to the NCHC’s “Definition of Honors Education” and to the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) for its time-tested list of high-impact educational practices. The NCHC’s definition was helpful in establishing our learning outcomes, so much so that it bears quoting in full:

Honors education is characterized by in-class and extra-curricular 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. (“Definition of Honors Education”)

Similarly, five of the AAC&U’s eleven high-impact practices were particularly important in shaping our honors curriculum:

1. Common intellectual experiences;
2. Writing-intensive courses;
3. Collaborative assignments and projects;
4. Undergraduate research; and
5. Service and community-based learning. (“High-Impact”)

Combining the NCHC definition and these AAC&U high-impact practices, my colleagues and I developed a list of requirements that all course proposals, including contract course proposals, must satisfy to earn the honors designation. The course will

1. be measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than a comparable learning experience;
2. promote community engagement, leadership, and/or the pursuit of the common good;
3. include a distinctive learner-directed environment and philosophy;
4. help students develop effective written, oral, and/or interpersonal communication skills;
5. help students become independent critical thinkers;
6. develop collaborative relationships among students and between faculty and students; and
7. result in the production of a scholarly or creative product suitable for sharing with others outside of class through some scholarly venue.

While we decided that it would not be feasible for every course to satisfy all of these requirements—although many do—we stipulated that all courses **MUST** satisfy the first two requirements, in

addition to at least two of the remaining five. There are, of course, differences between regular and contract course proposals: applications for traditional honors courses require only one review and approval while the unique collaborative effort personally negotiated between an instructor and a student means that applications must be submitted each time a student wishes to contract a course. An important part of this labor-intensive undertaking, then, is that faculty are compensated with stipends for their pedagogical engagement with honors students across our curriculum.

We consider this collaboration and negotiation process to be crucial parts of the learning experience because they set the stage for the type of interaction that should take place throughout the semester and that positions students to be actively engaged in the planning of their educations. Our honors college therefore offers guidance to both students and instructors as they collaborate in the creation of these contract course applications. (See Application for Contracting an Honors Course in the Appendix.) This document provides faculty and students with specific information about contract design, expected outcomes, and the submission and approval process.

Briefly, all contracts at ESU are tied to existing non-honors courses, the overwhelming majority of which are worth three credits. Students thus earn three credits for completing a contract, as they would for completing a traditional stand-alone honors course. To graduate “With Honors,” students must complete three honors seminars, earn 12 additional credits of either traditional or contract courses, and satisfy substantial co-curricular requirements while maintaining a 3.5 grade point average. To graduate “With High Honors,” students must complete the three honors seminars, earn 18 additional credits of traditional or contract courses, and satisfy co-curricular requirements beyond those for graduating “With Honors” while maintaining a 3.5 grade point average. Our honors college has a separate mentoring program for stand-alone independent study and co-curricular experiences. We hold workshops for interested faculty and students each semester to explain both contracts and mentoring.

Our experience at ESU has been that the requirements for honors transcript designations ensure that students enjoy high-impact honors educational experiences throughout our curriculum. I offer the following explanation, along with examples of contract work our students have completed, for each requirement, in the hope that examples from our honors college can benefit others faced with similar curricular choices.

## **DESCRIPTION AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE REQUIREMENTS**

### **Requirement 1:**

#### **Be Measurably Broader, Deeper, or More Complex**

Consistent with the NCHC’s “Definition of Honors Education,” applications for contract courses must explain how the course will be “measurably broader, deeper, or more complex” than traditional courses. While the importance of this characteristic is obvious, the key word is “measurably,” which means that the superior nature of these courses must be verifiable through assessment activities.

### **Requirement 2:**

#### **Promote Community Engagement, Leadership, and/or the Pursuit of the Common Good**

This second is perhaps the most complex of our honors course requirements because of its grounding in our institutional mission and strategic plan, in keeping with the NCHC’s “Definition of Honors Education” as “tailored to fit the institution’s culture and mission.” This statement empowers institutions to be both distinctive in honors curricular and co-curricular offerings and connected to the institution’s strategic plan, vision, and mission statement. Both ESU’s mission statement and its strategic plan emphasize community engagement, adaptive leadership, and the pursuit of the common good. Honors at ESU is a theme-based college that aligns with the university’s strategic plan by including adaptive leadership training and community engagement as foundational activities. Our Vision Statement claims that “the Honors College at Emporia

State University aspires to be recognized as a significant catalyst for the improvement of communities in Kansas and beyond,” and our Mission Statement promises that “the Honors College at Emporia State University will prepare students to be agents of change for the common good in their respective communities.” Inspired by these statements and the AAC&U’s high-impact practice of “service and community-based learning,” this requirement ensures that the courses themselves reflect the mission and culture of our particular institution (“High-Impact”).

While leadership development is a common mission of colleges and universities, ESU has aligned its mission with the idea of adaptive leadership, a model developed at Harvard University by Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky and taught by the Kansas Leadership Center, a non-profit educational organization based in Wichita, Kansas (O’Malley and Cebula). This model aligns its very specific definition of leadership—mobilizing others to make progress on deep, daunting, adaptive challenges—with principles and competencies that practitioners aim to master. Adaptive leadership distinguishes between leadership and authority and between technical problems that can be fixed by experts and adaptive challenges that require more complex forms of leadership. Five principles and four competencies of adaptive leadership are essential for our students:

### *Principles*

1. Leadership is an activity not a position.
2. Anyone can lead, anytime, anywhere.
3. It starts with you and must engage others.
4. Your purpose must be clear.
5. It’s risky.

### *Competencies*

1. Diagnose Situation.
2. Manage Self.

3. Energize Others.
4. Intervene Skillfully.

These principles and competencies are embedded in core honors courses as well as other curricular and co-curricular activities.

For a number of reasons, the alignment of activities with institutional mission documents is an excellent strategy for honors programs and colleges. Not only does this practice result in a distinctive approach to honors education, as I have suggested, but it also carries favor from the administration by demonstrating that the honors program or college respects the institution's mission and intends to be a major player in helping to achieve it.

### **Requirement 3: Include a Distinctive Learner-Directed Environment and Philosophy**

Derived directly from the NCHC's "Definition of Honors Education," this requirement empowers students to participate actively in their own educations. The word "empowers" is critical here, emphasizing the role of active learning. This requirement addresses Badenhausen's concern about power differentials between faculty and students in contracts (8–9).

### **Requirement 4: Help Students Develop Effective Written, Oral, and/or Interpersonal Communication Skills**

While submitted contract applications demonstrate the AAC&U's high-impact practice of writing-intensive work, oral communication skills are also important to many contracts. Students need public speaking opportunities and interpersonal skills to grow as leaders and scholars, particularly in the age of social media.

### **Requirement 5: Help Students Become Independent Critical Thinkers**

According to the AAC&U, "Critical thinking is a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas,

artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion” (“Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric”). We included this requirement because critical thinking is a habit that empowers students to share in the responsibility for teaching and learning and to become change agents for the common good.

**Requirement 6:  
Develop Collaborative Relationships among Students  
and between Faculty and Students**

The development of a collaborative relationship occurs from the start of this process when students and faculty are negotiating contracts. Our assessment data show that the relationship generally becomes stronger as contract course activity unfolds, and we therefore offer contact courses as a form of mentoring comparable to undergraduate research and other co-curricular activities.

**Requirement 7:  
Result in the Production of a Scholarly or Creative  
Product Suitable for Sharing with Others outside of  
Class through Some Scholarly Venue**

Opportunities to present scholarly and creative work in public venues challenge students to develop professionally, reinforce connections with communities beyond the campus, and sharpen communication and critical-thinking skills.

\* \* \*

Grounded in well-established, time-tested educational pedagogies, these seven requirements define the intentional, collaborative, and high-impact learning experience that all honors contracts and courses must offer our students. Contract applications that embed these requirements minimize the risk of projects with arbitrary, isolated, or unintentional activities.

**THE SUBMISSION PROCESS**

Contract course applications must be submitted by the instructor to the honors college by the end of the third week of class. The

ample time allotted for application submission is based on the belief that many students will desire to contract a course only after experiencing a few class meetings, discovering how much they enjoy the class and the instructor, and realizing the benefits of an honors version of the course. While some instructors announce on the first day of class that they are willing to engage in course contracts with interested honors students, students know that they must take the initiative to approach the instructor.

Contract course applications are approved only after review by the honors dean. The application approval process includes careful assessment of selected guidelines to ensure course alignment with published requirements and the likelihood that the contract course will deliver a high-impact experience to the student through its completion. Instructors and students may revise contract applications should the application be found deficient. Upon approval of contract applications, the honors college notifies the Office of the Registrar, and registration personnel create honors versions of the courses and move students from regular courses to the honors versions, ensuring that the courses appear as “honors” on the students’ transcripts. At the end of the semester, instructors provide assessment data documenting the effectiveness of the course design in meeting these requirements.

## **EXAMPLES FROM APPLICATIONS**

This section features a few select examples of contract applications that align with each requirement as well as their final assessments. These examples should provide readers with a sense of the possibilities and potential of contract applications from various disciplines. Under each requirement heading, brief descriptions of ways that students and instructors have met the requirement are followed by some typical, rather than exceptional, application and assessment examples. Since 2015, over 200 contract applications have been approved and completed with assessment data being provided at semester’s end.

**Requirement 1:  
Be Measurably Broader, Deeper, or More Complex**

Projects have met this requirement in a variety of ways. Contract work designed to make course content broader, deeper, or more complex has engaged students in 1) exploring the links among local businesses, civic organizations, and the judiciary; 2) designing and conducting research using fitness testing; and 3) preparing and delivering an oral presentation about reed instruments and performing at a recital connected to that presentation, to name just a few approaches.

One particularly illustrative example is a contract application for a literature course, which included the following narrative:

This course will not only have additional material for reading and study, but will also allow the student to practice skills required in the teaching field that would otherwise not be used in the course. In addition, the creation of this literary unit plan will provide a framework for future lesson plans created by the student in the teaching field. This project provides an opportunity to convey literary concepts and principles to children in a new and unique way and to practice techniques to encourage discussions of literary texts. Instead of simply making the plan on paper, the student will really see how young readers who might be learning from this lesson plan react to, understand, and make meaning with texts.

The end-of-semester assessment for this contract then included the following comment from the faculty mentor:

The student was required to design, develop, and execute a project related to the course's dual emphasis on the literary field of young adult literature as well as the pedagogical emphasis on working with young readers. This required additional reading in terms of both literary texts (during the selection process when she was deciding what her reading group would prepare) as well as in the professional

literature, as a part of her preparation for running a book club/discussion group. The final product resulted in the development of a blog [URL included in original], which “housed” photos and examples of the work the young readers developed, as well as lesson plans ultimately aimed at educators interested in utilizing some of the same activities in their own classrooms.

A comparison of the application with the assessment highlighted some notable points. First, the contract clearly stipulated activities that satisfied the broader, deeper, or more complex requirement. Second, the activities were measurable. Third, adaptation that capitalized on the dynamic nature of this experience and added depth to it occurred throughout the semester. For example, the application did not mention a blog, nor the particulars of the project; rather, the value of these activities emerged as the collaboration unfolded. Fourth, a recurring finding is that activities aligned with one requirement often spill over into other requirements. In this case, the assessment highlighted the development of lesson plans that other educators could use in their own classes, an outcome that meets both the common good component of Requirement 2 and the sharing outside the classroom component of Requirement 7.

### **Requirement 2: Promote Community Engagement, Leadership, and/or the Pursuit of the Common Good**

Some instructors expressed initial concern that this requirement might be restrictive or eliminate some courses from the honors curriculum, but that concern proved to be unfounded. With some imagination, most course applications have met this requirement. A chemistry course, for example, required students to test homes for radon and groundwater for pollution. An honors math course included a requirement to tutor middle school students who struggled with math or to offer educational activities at a math and science night held at a local middle school. A literature course contract required the organization of a “love of reading” event at a local high school.

A contract application for an art education course included the following activities beyond regular coursework. The faculty member's narrative highlights the project's collaborative nature, flexibility, capacity to focus on the student's passion, and community engagement:

The student and I discussed a subject of interest to her: Instruction Differentiation and Populations of Exceptionality. From this, we discussed a community venue to get some authentic experience. I set the student up with the non-profit Kansas Free Arts. This organization aims to offer art experiences for at-risk youth. The student set up meetings with the founder, who is an art therapist. The student met weekly with the founder as well as ESU graduate interns. With this community, she was able to discuss her interests and plan a workshop specific to her student population of interest. She created a proposal for a Sensory Art Experience Workshop, which targets K-6 children with autism. The student is planning on actually running this workshop, which will be open to the community, at Kansas Free Arts in August.

The instructor's assessment confirmed that the above-mentioned activities were completed:

I assessed this aspect with the following checklist: 1) Student self-initiative (attending meetings, reaching out to foundation leaders, and co-planning workshop while collaborating with leaders and grad student interns); 2) Student understanding of target population and community environment in workshop proposal (identify characteristics of autism, identify key characteristics of child artistic development, identify key characteristics of the Kansas Free Arts environment including: time, materials, space, and procedures).

### **Requirement 3: Include a Distinctive Learner-Directed Environment and Philosophy**

While Badenhausen expresses concern about the power differential that may occur in contracts, our experience has been that instructors relish working with motivated students eager to step up and assert themselves in the selection of course requirements and activities. Requirements mentioned in a number of applications include strategies that allow students to take the lead in determining the structure of mentoring time and the roles of instructor and student as learning collaborators. Some applications have even described how instructors have created an environment of choice for the students through the selection of requirements, the activities that align with the requirements, the decision about how to spend time, and the delegation of responsibility for specific tasks.

An example from a business management contract application illustrates the learner-directed nature of many contracts:

The environment is learner-directed in that the student was given very broad direction (we must meet objectives and have a tangible product) and asked to design their own course. The student has provided several alternatives as to how they wish to approach the semester. The student will ultimately decide which path to take.

The instructor's assessment for this course included the following:

Other than [the instructor] providing the general idea for what a reasonable product would be, the student chose the topics, how the topics would be studied, and . . . the framework for the final product. The student chose to read a number of resources and [to] build an annotated bibliography as well as a presentation of her findings.

I would add that these findings were presented at Research and Creativity Day on the ESU campus. Once again, readers will see how one requirement dovetails with another. The business management student exercised personal initiative in building a detailed

annotated bibliography and in sharing the findings at a public venue. The student indicated her appreciation of both the guidance and the freedom the instructor gave her.

#### **Requirement 4: Help Students Develop Effective Written, Oral, and/or Interpersonal Communication Skills**

While the AAC&U high-impact practice of a writing-intensive focus is often emphasized in the submitted contracts, oral communication skills are also important. Many contracts, such as the following example, include as requirements the completion of a research or scholarly paper and the delivery of an oral presentation at some public venue:

[The student] will be creating a lesson plan to educate students on a social identity of his choice (religion, but subject to change), apart from one he currently holds. [He] will deliver this lesson plan in the future for assessment by [instructor] . . . to improve presentation skills and public speaking. [He] will also expand on the Voice project (see syllabus) by immersing himself into a culture, apart from one he currently holds, instead of simply researching it. [He] will perform practices held by his chosen culture and report on his experiences doing so with extra focus and depth.

The instructor's assessment was simple and concise:

The student facilitated leadership learning with a 60-minute in-class lesson. The student's performance reflected competence in offering oral presentations.

#### **Requirement 5: Help Students Become Independent Critical Thinkers**

Students and instructors frequently select this requirement, and a wide range of activities accomplish its goals. An art history contract application addressed the critical-thinking requirement this way:

This proposed contract aims to help [the student] become a more independent and critical thinker in several ways. The in-depth research project and paper will challenge her to go beyond traditional classroom assignments and particularly emphasize the use of application and analysis skills, not just knowledge- and comprehension-level skills. Additionally, [the student] will be able to choose the specific focus of her art historical research and the cultures she will explore and analyze, highlighting independent thinking. The combination of sociological considerations and art historical analysis will also necessitate critical, cross-disciplinary thinking.

The instructor's assessment for this requirement noted the following:

This proposed contract helped [the student] become a more independent and critical thinker in several ways. The in-depth research project and paper challenged her to go beyond traditional classroom assignments and emphasized the use of application and analysis skills, not just knowledge- and comprehension-level skills. Additionally, [the student] was able to choose the specific focus of her art historical research and the cultures she explored and analyzed, utilizing independent thinking. The combination of sociological considerations and art historical analysis necessitated critical, cross-disciplinary thought.

The critical-thinking requirement is one of the most common requirements selected, but even for applications without this specific requirement, many contract activities align with the AAC&U's definition of critical thinking provided earlier in this chapter.

### **Requirement 6: Develop Collaborative Relationships among Students and between Faculty and Students**

The development of a collaborative relationship occurs at the beginning of the process as students and faculty negotiate the contract. Furthermore, our assessment data show that the relationship

generally becomes stronger as contract course activity unfolds. Based on these findings, we have found contract courses to be a form of mentoring comparable to undergraduate research and other co-curricular activities.

An emerging trend in our college is a group of students (three, in this case) approaching an instructor to contract a course; this dynamic develops relationships not only between students and the faculty mentor, but also within the student group. The following proposal narrative from a chemistry course focuses on this collaborative relationship in a STEM field:

Students will work hand-in-hand with the instructor of the course. This one-on-one experience gives the chance to both student and faculty to share more knowledge beyond the textbook. In addition, this helps the faculty explore weaknesses or strengths in the students' body of knowledge and address them to help getting to a deeper level of thinking. Students will develop collaborative relationships with one another and with the faculty by working in groups in order to address civic issues. During our meeting time, we plan to address issues that we have come upon throughout the week. This will also be an opportunity for faculty and student mentors to help guide the students through critical thinking on their projects. In this way, we will be able to collaborate with them and create an environment that will help catalyze learning and a deeper level of thinking.

The instructor's assessment for this contract reported the following:

Students worked in groups of three to complete their research projects, which necessitated collaboration among students. Students also collaborated with several faculty in the Department of Physical Sciences to learn various sampling and laboratory techniques. Faculty trained students and supervised their use of high-tech analytical equipment, such as an HPLC and GC-MS, as well.

This assessment highlights not only collaboration but also the broader, deeper, and more complex requirement. In addition, these

STEM students worked together and with their instructor to think critically about scientific concepts and to learn complex sampling and laboratory skills in a safe and supportive environment.

**Requirement 7:  
Result in the Production of a Scholarly or Creative  
Product Suitable for Sharing with Others outside of  
Class through Some Scholarly Venue**

Many contract applications stipulate that students will write papers suitable for presentation. The following summary is perhaps more instructive than any one example. For each of the past two years, eighteen and nineteen students, respectively, have presented at the Great Plains Honors Conference's (GPHC) annual meeting. Eleven of this past year's nineteen presenters wrote and practiced their presentations as part of completing honors contract courses. Attendance and participation at the GPHC are among the most popular of all honors college activities at ESU, and a critical mass of students have discovered contracts to be a means for achieving that end. Presentation occurs at other venues as well. The use of contract courses in this way was a bit serendipitous; it did not initially occur to us that contracts would be used to prepare for presentations at professional meetings to the extent that they are. Furthermore, in the past year, two contracts have produced publications, one in a refereed geopolitics journal and the other in a nursing magazine.

Other examples of public sharing include art exhibits, musical performances, poetry readings, and service-learning projects for civic organizations such as public schools. One notable scholarly product was the completion and distribution of an oral history of area veterans, including those who served during World War II. The oral history was particularly valuable because Emporia, Kansas, the home of ESU, is the founding city of the Veteran's Day national holiday.

## CONCLUSIONS

The strategy and data presented above show that contract courses can and do deliver high-impact honors experiences to students. At ESU, several key lessons inform our approach to honors contracts:

1. Providing a common operational definition for all honors courses, whether traditional or contract, is essential. This definition should be informed by the NCHC's "Definition of Honors Education" and the AAC&U's list of high-impact practices.
2. Creating a manageable list of specific requirements consistent with this definition is also essential.
3. The institution's particular mission and culture, as articulated in mission documents, should drive the requirements.
4. Stakeholders including administration, faculty, and students should be involved in shaping these requirements.
5. Contract course applications should be completed collaboratively by faculty and students and should target specific requirements that align with activities and outcomes stipulated in the contract.
6. The contract activities should involve instructor-student collaboration and mentoring.
7. Assessment data demonstrating the success of the contract are essential.
8. Faculty should be compensated in some meaningful way for their efforts.

Despite the success of this strategy at ESU, a number of key issues from our experience may be useful to those educators considering a similar model. First, we have discovered at our institution a critical mass of motivated instructors involved in most of the contract courses offered. We provide in-service training to instructors interested or engaged in contract courses. This training offers

guidance on the application process and insight into best contract practices. The training also connects instructors with each other, creating space for ongoing guidance and support. While these instructors are motivated primarily by their desire to work with honors students, some form of compensation is helpful as well. The current reality in higher education is the expectation that we do more with less. Many instructors have had minimal pay raises for several years as well as increasing demands made on their time; the need for some form of compensation is essential even if that compensation is minimal. At ESU, we provide stipends of \$750 per contract, but we understand that various kinds of rewards might also work, as others in this volume suggest. For example, Haseleu and Taylor report that their institution provides \$500 stipends and professional-development training (184); Bambina notes the value of social and professional faculty support at honors informational luncheons (122); and Miller reports that her institution recognizes the value of honors contract mentoring in the tenure and promotion of faculty (279–80).

Second, prior to the creation of our honors college, ESU offered relatively few honors courses. Consequently, the push to develop courses based on a common definition and list of requirements was easier than it would have been had our effort required the redesign of a significant number of courses. Changing the culture of an institution where the content of an honors course is the sole decision of the instructor may be more difficult. At ESU, the list of requirements was created by committees of stakeholders that included faculty, students, and administration. While some faculty were reluctant to dedicate the time to retooling their honors courses and a few others saw our effort as an affront to academic freedom, we have found that most are grateful for the guidance that we offer in providing the list of requirements. We trust that other institutions will have a comparable experience.

Third, for this strategy to work, honors students must be willing to contact instructors and to negotiate with them as they collaborate in writing the application. We have found that willing students emerge in a classroom environment where, according to the NCHC,

the “instructors are those who are willing to share the responsibility for teaching and learning with their students” (“Honors Course Design”). The key to successful contracts is to engage willing instructors who respond to students enthusiastically and supportively. This is particularly true for new students who are often a bit timid and reluctant to approach instructors. Experienced honors students can also provide encouragement, guidance, and support to new students as they begin to initiate contracts.

Fourth, while I acknowledge that contract courses do not always provide a venue for honors students to interact with each other, they do create space for students to collaborate with instructors and develop important mentoring relationships. Given the value of such relationships for retention and academic success (Salinitri), the benefits of contract courses outweigh any weakness in this area. In addition, the possibility of group or interactive contracts creates the potential for honors students to collaborate with each other or their peers in the course.

Fifth, while the number of applications to our honors college is high, the demand for traditional honors courses, particularly general education honors courses, has decreased significantly because of the number of college credits earned by students still in high school. This situation results in a growing demand for other forms of high-impact learning. These non-traditional forms can include well-designed contract courses, mentoring, undergraduate research, community engagement opportunities, leadership training, and domestic and international educational travel experiences. I would argue that in the emerging higher education environment, the NCHC’s 20% guideline may need to include such co-curricular high-impact learning activities as opposed to only traditional honors courses. We at ESU are highly motivated to provide high-impact contract courses to honors students. We believe that they are our most viable option for delivering an honors curriculum amidst the current demands to graduate students on time, with no more credits than absolutely necessary, and with minimal debt. While the contract option is particularly salient for offering upper-division, program-specific courses to students who have completed

much of the general education program while in high school, it is also important at two-year colleges, as Haseleu and Taylor argue. Most potential honors students, as well as their parents, are pleased to learn that they can complete honors courses in their major program of study without the need for additional non-program courses. The contract course strategy offered here is not perfect, but it has proven successful at ESU. A strategy such as this one may be a necessary and pragmatic response for many honors programs and colleges now and in the future.

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**APPENDIX****Application for Contracting an Honors Course**

An instructor in collaboration with an honors college student can transform a regular course into an honors contract course. This option allows students to earn honors credits while completing courses in their regular program of study. The student will attend the regular course while completing additional learning-based honors activities as stipulated in the guidelines below. While any course can be contracted for honors credit, the contracting option is ideal for courses in the student's major program of study.

**Part I: Guidance**

Prior to preparing a proposal for contracting an honors course, the instructor should carefully read Honors Courses and Honors Contract Courses at Emporia State University: Guidelines for Instructors, posted on the honors college website. While it is not reasonable to expect each honors course to satisfy each of the seven objectives listed on this document, *it is expected that all courses will address Objectives 1 and 2, and at least two other objectives as deemed appropriate by the instructor.*

**Part II: Application**

1. Provide the name and E# of the student(s) for whom the course is being contracted and the semester the course will be offered.
2. Provide a copy of the course syllabus.
3. Provide a brief description of the role the instructor will play in supervising or mentoring this student.
4. Describe what the student will produce (e.g., paper, presentation, performance).
5. All courses must meet Objectives 1 and 2 from the guidance section above:
  - Describe the ways that the instructors will make this course broader, deeper, or more complex than a regular course.
  - Describe how the experience will include civic leadership, community engagement, or an advancement of the common good.
6. Identify additional objectives (at least two selected from Objectives 3–7 in the guidance section above), and describe how those objectives will be met.
7. The application should be submitted by the end of the third week of class during the semester the course is taught.

### **Part III: Procedure**

1. Submit this form to the director of the honors college for approval: [honors@emporia.edu](mailto:honors@emporia.edu).
2. Once approved, the department will be responsible for working with the Office of the Registrar to create an honors section of the course that will be offered in tandem with the regular course. All honors contract courses should be designated with section letter Z (AZ, BZ, etc.) and have the same number of credits as the tandem course. All honors contract courses should be designated “instructor approval required.” The class cap should be set at zero, with students being added to it on an individual basis; the Office of the Registrar will assist in this process. After the course designation is created by the Office of the Registrar, student enrollees should be transferred from the regular course to the honors course.
3. Applications must be submitted electronically as early as possible but will be accepted until the end of the third week of class during the semester the course is taught.

### **Part IV: Assessment**

All instructors of contract courses will be required to provide assessment data to the honors college within 30 days of the end of the semester in which the course was taught. Data will be collected electronically through Compliance Assist. Data should measure course effectiveness in meeting the stated honors college objectives listed above. Presently, there is no standardized rubric or other measurement instrument that instructors are required to use; rather, instructors should use embedded assessments such as course assignments, tests, and other graded requirements.

### **Compensation for Creating and Teaching Honors Contract Courses**

If an honors contract course is approved, instructors should proceed to create the course and work with department chairs to schedule the course. Instructors will be compensated during the semester the contract course is taught. Although compensation may vary based on budgetary constraints, the current established rate of compensation is \$750 for offering an honors contract course to an honors student who requests it. If more than one student requests to contract the same course, instructors will be compensated \$250 for each additional student up to a total of \$1,500. These funds are intended to compensate instructors for the extra work required for instruction of honors contract courses.

## CHAPTER TEN

# Facilitating Feedback: The Benefits of Automation in Monitoring Completion of Honors Contracts

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As we have seen in this volume so far, contract courses are an increasingly valuable pedagogical strategy for maintaining access to and demand for honors education. Administered with the “[i]ntentionality, transparency, [and] consistency” that Richard Badenhausen proposes in his opening essay (17), they can even, as Margaret Walsh suggests, help “shift [students’] focus from getting *out* of course requirements to getting *into* new and different courses to advance their capacity to learn” (40). While good reasons to offer contracts clearly exist, administering them nevertheless presents challenges. This essay considers process and pedagogy, with the aim of empowering both students and faculty to explore the pedagogical possibilities of contracts. At the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), we identified two interrelated challenges with the contract

process: 1) the approval and assessment of contracts and 2) the impact of contracts on faculty members' workloads. The UNR Honors Program streamlined the approval and assessment of honors contracts for students and faculty by updating our contract form and introducing a qualitative online assessment tool to help faculty evaluate student progress on honors learning outcomes. Our quantitative and qualitative data suggest that such changes make a positive impact on both student learning and faculty engagement for honors programs and colleges considering contract automation and streamlining.

UNR is a midsized public land-grant university. According to internal census data, the number of undergraduate students enrolled at UNR was 17,513 in fall 2018. The UNR Honors Program is likewise a midsized program that serves nearly 500 students, approximately 3% of the total undergraduate population. Honors students come from all of the university's six colleges (agriculture, business, education, engineering, liberal arts, and science) and four schools (health sciences, journalism, medicine, and nursing). Although the College of Liberal Arts is the largest academic unit at UNR, a majority of honors students are actually STEM majors; since fall 2011, 63% of incoming students have declared majors in the Colleges of Agriculture, Science, and Engineering. These demographics inform the honors program's approach to contracts and shape the content of those contracts, which are designed to empower students as they practice critical thought and master practical skills in lab and field techniques. Kambra Bolch notes that progress in many academic degrees, particularly in STEM disciplines, requires adherence to inflexible course schedules that leave little room for exploration beyond the major; such inflexibility is often incompatible with honors curricula that encourage students to sample a variety of honors general education offerings in their first and second years. The UNR honors curriculum, composed of first- and second-year courses in the arts, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics, emphasizes general education courses that teach students the value of the liberal arts. Here, as at other institutions represented in this volume, STEM honors students

are particularly interested in continuing honors work by connecting the skills they have learned in their early honors coursework to more specialized technical skills in their upper-division major courses. Advanced courses in such disciplines as biochemistry, biology, engineering, mathematics, and psychology are particularly popular as contract options among our students, with some representative courses such as Principles of Genetics, Fluid Mechanics, Mathematical Modeling, and Perception inspiring dozens of contracts over the last several years.

Adding to “the difficulties imposed by structured curricula” like those that characterize many STEM majors, observes Bolch, are the “significant numbers of college credits” that the majority of honors students now bring with them to college and that “typically [fulfill] university general education requirements, thus discouraging students from taking honors courses which [fulfill] those requirements” (50). Annmarie Guzy highlights the illogic of this state of affairs in which “the honors students we have admitted based in part on their willingness to take on challenging coursework such as AP classes are now struggling to find enough liberal-arts-based honors electives to complete an honors program” (3). The challenges of AP/IB/dual-enrollment credit affect UNR honors students across all disciplines, including those in the liberal arts and social sciences, with the result that while they all do take some honors general education courses, most students also elect to complete at least one contract course at some point during their time in the program. In fact, many students choose to complete several contracts over the course of their undergraduate careers since we have chosen not to limit the number, instead ensuring the quality of the contract courses a student may complete by focusing on their pedagogical value. To wit, between the fall 2010 and spring 2017 semesters, 1,061 students contracted for honors credit in 618 courses taught by 429 distinct faculty members across all of UNR’s colleges and schools.<sup>1</sup> The topics of these contract courses, all of which must be undertaken in non-honors courses of at least three credit hours at the third- or fourth-year level, fall squarely outside the boundaries of UNR’s existing general education honors curriculum. They do

support honors learning outcomes, however, by allowing collaborative learning between student and faculty mentor. Students electing to pursue honors contracts also enjoy credit-for-credit matching of contract course credit to honors course credit; thus, a successfully completed contract in a three-credit course yields three honors credits.

With 60–80 honors students electing to contract for honors credit in any given semester, contracts collectively engage 25–35% of the total UNR honors population each year. Importantly, some of these students would not be continuously engaged in honors coursework if it were not for the contract option. In this sense, contracts represent an important opportunity for our students to make progress toward honors graduation and, practically speaking, for the program to retain advanced undergraduates who have already completed their general education requirements; this group includes continuing and transfer students as well as entering students who have accumulated significant AP/IB/Dual Enrollment credit prior to matriculation.

This positive impact on retention results at least in part from the outstanding mentoring experiences that faculty members create for students engaged in honors contracts. Contract courses at UNR, as elsewhere, are sometimes initially undertaken out of convenience. In several highly subscribed STEM courses, for example, faculty have, over time, developed parallel syllabi for students wishing to earn honors credit; while these ready-made extensions of the course do add pedagogical depth and value, they limit the student's role in designing the contract experience. More often, however, contracts have taken the form of short-term mentorship experiences that allow students to work closely and creatively with faculty members who guide them as apprentices in their chosen fields. This mentoring relationship can be especially important for arts and humanities majors, who often do not enjoy the kind of ongoing mentorship more readily available to STEM majors working in a research lab. In fact, it is often the case that contracts enable arts and humanities majors, like STEM students, to develop relationships with the faculty who ultimately supervise their senior thesis research.

Such early and sustained contact with thesis mentors sets students up for success when they enter our pre-thesis research methods course and engage in their thesis research. In the research methods course, students who have completed contracts enjoy the benefits of input from a trusted faculty member during the crucial period when they are developing their research questions and methodologies. Students can then begin to explore some of these research questions as they lay the groundwork for their thesis projects. One of our Spanish majors who wrote a thesis on forensic linguistics, for example, also completed a contract project on Spanish-language Miranda rights in an advanced linguistics seminar taught by her mentor. The connections between contract and thesis work can give honors undergraduates unprecedented access to both broad and deep knowledge of a subject, guided by a trusted faculty mentor. At a time when the liberal arts, in particular, as Jeffrey J. Selingo observes, are under threat at institutions across the United States, the value of honors contracts that expand and deepen students' understanding of their own fields, particularly in relation to other disciplines, becomes increasingly evident.

Among UNR honors students, a desire for such enhanced learning is clear in the variety of contract projects proposed each semester. Alongside more traditional contracts that result in expanded term papers or supplemental research essays, projects that allow students to gain practical experience, either through research apprenticeship in a discipline or community-engaged learning, are growing in number. Effective advising has been instrumental in this shift toward applied contract projects. Honors advisors frequently guide students interested in completing contract courses in selecting an appropriate course for such work and, by leveraging knowledge of previous contracts in those courses and disciplines, assist students in developing basic project ideas that they can use to open discussion of a contract with their instructors. Broad dissemination of guidelines and learning outcomes for honors contracts via the program's website and email also prepares faculty to respond to requests from students to mentor contract projects.

In recent semesters, for example, a fine arts major taking a sound and image course developed a practical project focused on professional skills: the student managed a collaborative concert and sound-reactive visualization screening, taking responsibility for computer and AV equipment and producing recordings of the performances. Similarly, a veterinary science major studying the physiology of reproduction produced an instructional video on pregnancy detection in cows; in the student's words, the video covered "methods of pregnancy checking, anatomic considerations, ultrasonography principles," and other practical topics for livestock management. Such projects highlight the ways in which contract courses serve both students, who have the opportunity to complete a project with real-world applications, and faculty, who reap the benefits of dedicated student participation in their research and creative activities. Moreover, successful contracts all meet our honors learning outcomes of 1) broadening and deepening students' experience of their major fields, 2) helping them to forge mentoring relationships with faculty, and 3) giving them a platform for demonstrating specific knowledge and skills.

### **STREAMLINING HONORS CONTRACTS FOR PEDAGOGICAL SUCCESS**

Because contracts help students meet specific honors learning outcomes, making the opportunity available to as many students as possible is important even though the creation of so many one-on-one mentoring relationships can be an administrative challenge. Monitoring 60–80 student contracts from conception to completion requires the sustained attention of honors faculty and administrators throughout the term. Particularly when special circumstances (for instance, the inability to conduct field work in exactly the way planned because of funding or scheduling difficulties) arise, students and faculty need guidance and reassurance from the honors program to keep contract projects on track and eligible for credit. Additionally, the comparatively decentralized nature of contracts as part of the honors curriculum means that faculty who may be unfamiliar with honors pedagogy assume responsibility for ensuring that students' contract work meets honors standards.

In order to guide new or inexperienced faculty through the contract process, honors programs and colleges must develop comprehensive guidelines that steer students and faculty toward projects that are sufficiently rigorous to merit honors credit; Bolch describes this process in some detail (54). Once contract projects are designed, the responsibility for gathering data about completed student work and faculty feedback on the mentoring experience rests with the honors program or college. Badenhausen makes a compelling argument against “contract forms that emphasize book-keeping” because they “exacerbate [the] disconnection between contracts and curriculum” (13). He also recognizes the risk of having to ask busy departments to volunteer faculty time for honors. Faced with too many such requests, Badenhausen cautions:

The disciplinary unit may even develop some hostility toward honors [...], for it has most likely already been asked to offer honors sections of introductory courses and now it is being requested to devote limited faculty resources to accommodate honors again in the form of contracts. (14)

The challenges here are first to embed contracts pedagogically within the honors curriculum and then to ensure that faculty and their departments are rewarded and valued for the part they play within that curriculum.

The prospect of working with highly motivated students who want to deepen learning beyond the classroom is an inspiring and rare opportunity for faculty, who may for this reason choose to teach honors courses, serve as thesis/capstone mentors, or support honors in other ways. Nevertheless, the robust participation in contract courses at UNR, which relies upon significant uncompensated faculty participation, demands that equal attention be paid to creating sustainable, rewarding contract experiences for both students and faculty. Because honors contracts involve additional in-depth work within students’ majors, they represent opportunities for students to build upon the foundation of stand-alone honors courses, which, once again, tend to be general education courses at UNR. For example, a physics major in the honors program would enroll in honors sections of the introductory physics sequence. As a

sophomore, junior, or senior, this student could complete one or several honors contracts in progressively more advanced physics courses, perhaps with the same faculty members who taught the introductory courses and likely in conjunction with lab research. Ultimately, this contract work might form the basis of the student's thesis research in physics. In such cases, honors contracts represent a bridge connecting lower- and upper-division honors coursework and support sustained engagement with honors throughout the process of earning a degree. As the students who seek faculty mentorship for their contract projects become active participants in various research and creative activities ongoing in their disciplines, the relationship between the honors program and academic departments is more symbiotic than exploitative, with faculty compensation coming in the forms of additional student engagement, assistance with research activities, and satisfying mentor-mentee relationships.

A streamlined, user-friendly contract process ensures that such enriching experiences are as accessible as possible to both students and faculty. Designing a process that serves both groups equally well is, of course, challenging, and the need for greater honors support for faculty mentoring honors contracts became increasingly apparent over time at UNR. Faculty were expected to assume significant administrative responsibility for contracts, including project design, assessment, and submission, without substantial input from the honors program. Indicators that faculty wanted more contract support included inquiries about whether and how honors projects should be factored into course grades; how projects in unique formats, such as prototypes or videos, should be submitted at the end of the term; and whether the honors program would be willing to accept electronic files and signatures. In essence, the innovative and original contracts that students and faculty were proposing had evolved beyond our traditional, paper-based honors process. The large volume of contract paperwork that flooded the honors program office at the end of each term created a backlog of work for both honors administrators and contract mentors. Those forms and projects returned via campus mail or fax had to be scanned

for our electronic records, while those received by email had to be printed. Inevitably, some forms and projects arrived under separate cover, or did not arrive at all, and had to be pursued. This entire mass of floating documentation then needed to be matched with the original contracts submitted at the beginning of the term and, finally, filed in students' folders. Needless to say, this process was time-consuming and inefficient for students, faculty, and the honors program. Most troublingly of all, honors faculty had the distinct impression that they were spending more time organizing the paperwork associated with contracts than assessing students' work and progress in honors.

### **UPDATING THE HONORS CONTRACT PROCESS**

In order to support the research and creative activities of both students and faculty, the UNR Honors Program needed to redesign, simplify, and automate the contract process. The end-of-term obstacles to contract assessment and archiving, in particular, led to the development of a hybrid contract process that integrates paper and electronic submissions. Simplifying the contract form itself was the first step. Historically, we had used the form for both intake and assessment; it included space for both detailing the proposed project and reporting completion of the contract project and the "final course grade," a phrase that encouraged some faculty to make the mistake of averaging grades for the contract project and the course as a whole, a practice that was obviously unfair to non-honors students in these courses. Although faculty input was essential in developing the project description at the beginning of the semester, this form asked only for a faculty signature to verify contract completion; it did not afford faculty the opportunity to assess students' contract work in relation to honors learning outcomes.

The revised contract form, which still requires a description of the proposed project and the signatures of the student and faculty member, functions solely as a proposal. Students submit this contract proposal to the honors program for approval early in the term, but it is no longer recirculated at the end of the term. (Of course, the program does scan and send contract proposals to both the student

and mentor upon approval to document clear expectations of the project for all concerned.) The new form remains short enough that one designated honors administrator can easily read and approve all contracts and, as necessary, propose adjustments that ensure the project's alignment with honors learning outcomes. As Bolch notes, a single overseer of the contract process can also be a resource to students and faculty unfamiliar with the process (56). This stage of the contract process remains relatively low-tech and labor intensive.

Happily, technology has played a larger role in our reimagined end-of-term submission process. For several years, the honors program had required faculty to submit their students' final contract projects in an effort to avoid some of the issues Bolch describes, particularly that of well-meaning faculty signing off on incomplete projects for fear of negatively affecting students' progress (51). This submission requirement, however, together with the "final course grade" language described above, led to an unintended focus on assigning formal grades to contract projects. At the other extreme, faculty sometimes did not respond to requests from the honors program for project delivery, no doubt as a result of their other end-of-term responsibilities, with the result that honors had to work directly with students to collect projects without the benefit of faculty feedback. We therefore decided to take the most direct approach: we ask students to submit copies of their projects to the honors program while faculty submit assessments of those projects and the work that went into them. Based on faculty preference to scan and submit documents by email instead of campus mail or fax, we decided to move to an electronic submission process for both project and assessment. Not only, we reasoned, would both students and faculty appreciate the convenience of an electronic submission option, but electronic submissions would also reduce the time spent scanning and/or printing projects and forms and the paper involved in that process.

Our next step was to create a qualitative rubric to assess contract outcomes and to distinguish clearly between course grades and faculty evaluation of contract projects. The rubric was designed both to assess student progress on key honors learning outcomes

and to respect faculty's mentorship and time investment. Using a four-point Likert scale (excellent, good, fair, poor), faculty rate the completeness, originality/creativity, risk-taking, critical analysis, and accuracy of each project. (See Table 1.) The completeness and accuracy criteria ensure that faculty have received a professionally finished project and that the project meets expectations described in the contract proposal. The originality/creativity, risk-taking, and critical analysis criteria guide faculty in a more qualitative assessment of project content. Because students who pursue honors contracts, especially those who complete several, tend to do so in preparation for future thesis research, we felt that encouraging original research beyond the established contours of major coursework would support this synergy between contracts and thesis research. Knowing that such work is challenging for students who are not yet experts in their disciplines, the rubric also allows some leeway; for honors credit to be awarded for the course, a project must earn a rating of either excellent or good in four out of five categories. Importantly, the rubric does not include any numbers or make reference to letter grades.

We also simplified the submission process for faculty by using Formstack, an online subscription form builder, to turn the rubric into a clickable electronic form ("About the Company"). Students do not have access to this online form, but both faculty and the honors program encourage them to refer to the rubric as they propose and complete their contracts over the course of the term. Faculty then receive a link to the form in each of three reminder emails, which we start sending on the day before final exams begin each term. We include the whole rubric in the body of each reminder, saving faculty the effort of navigating to our website to review contract guidelines. At the end of the term, this easy email access to the rubric is much more direct than our past process, which asked faculty to download, print, review, and sign each contract and then to mail, fax, or scan/email their approval back to the honors program, with no requirement to include substantive commentary. By asking faculty to engage with the contract rubric at the end of the term, we ensure that they evaluate contracts in relation to the honors

learning outcomes that they were designed to meet. Reviewing the rubric has the added benefit of helping faculty to frame their mentorship activity over the course of the preceding term at a time when they may be working to complete their own self-assessment and performance appraisal documentation.

Just as the Formstack rubric makes evaluating contracts a one-step process for faculty, a companion Formstack form makes submitting projects straightforward for students, who also receive a series of reminder messages from the honors program. The simple student form requests the same basic details about the course and includes a file-upload function. While the student submission form is publicly accessible on the honors program website, we also include a link in both the initial email confirming the approval of the contract and subsequent end-of-term reminders. Because Formstack allows for the data from both forms to be exported to Excel spreadsheets, the maintenance of two separate submission portals does not create the same difficulties as our past practice of accepting multiple mailed/faxed/emailed submissions did. We can now easily cross-reference the two data sets to ensure that each submission finds its match, and we can use the sort function to help in data analysis. For example, we might wish to compare feedback across biology or psychology courses or to determine whether students were more successful in completing projects that required substantial written work or some other kind of deliverable. These data also make it possible to compare courses over time and thus to identify trends in student engagement with their majors. Logistically speaking, because the contracts and supporting syllabi are already archived in electronic form at the end of the term, the only remaining task is to merge separate files (scanned contract and syllabus, student-submitted project, and faculty evaluation). These modifications, once again, ensure that a single honors administrator can supervise the end-of-term processes efficiently.

## **STUDENT AND FACULTY RESPONSE TO THE UPDATED PROCESS**

Students have adapted well to the new process. Notably, all students who completed their contract projects over the three most

**TABLE 1. HONORS CONTRACT RUBRIC**

	<b>Completeness</b>	<b>Originality/Creativity</b>	<b>Risk Taking</b>	<b>Critical Analysis</b>	<b>Accuracy</b>
<b>Excellent</b>	Student completed all components of the honors project as set out in the project description.	Student's project is original/creative and demonstrates a clear understanding of scholarship in this discipline.	Student set challenging goals for the honors project and met them fully.	Student's approach to the project demonstrates a high level of skill in critical analysis.	All submitted components of the honors project are free from typographical and other errors and are presented in a professional manner.
<b>Good</b>	Student completed all components of the honors project. One component was not as anticipated based on the project description.	Student's project is somewhat original/creative and demonstrates a good understanding of scholarship in this discipline.	Student set challenging goals for the honors project and met them partially.	Student's approach to the project demonstrates some skill in critical analysis.	All submitted components of the honors project are presented in a professional manner. A few minor typographical or other errors are present.
<b>Fair</b>	Student did not complete all components of the honors project or two or more components of the project were not as expected.	Student's project lacks originality/creativity but demonstrates some understanding of scholarship in this discipline.	Student set less challenging goals for the honors project but met them fully.	Student's approach to the project demonstrates a low level of skill in critical analysis.	One component of the honors project is presented in a less than professional manner or several serious typographical or other errors are present.
<b>Poor</b>	Student did not complete the honors project or submitted a project inconsistent with the project description.	Student's project lacks originality/creativity and does not demonstrate an understanding of scholarship in this discipline.	Student did not set challenging goals for the honors project or failed to meet the goals set for the project.	Student's approach to the project fails to demonstrate skill in critical analysis.	The honors project is not presented in a professional manner. Many serious typographical or other errors are present.

recent terms submitted copies to the honors program on time. Given that students had previously been quite willing to supply copies of projects when asked, this result is perhaps unsurprising. The data on the rate and timeliness of faculty feedback submission, however, are more interesting. Faculty response data for five recent terms, three of which (fall 2017, spring 2018, and fall 2018) employed the new contract process, clearly demonstrate its impact. (See Table 2.)

The data show a significant decline in the number of contracts left outstanding at the final grade deadline with the new process, which began in fall 2017. This result is positive for two reasons. First, the honors program is now able to inform students of the outcomes of their contracts within a few days of final grade submission. Second, we can begin work on adding honors designations to students' transcripts, a process that requires several weeks at UNR, in a far timelier fashion. Interestingly, however, the data do not reveal a clear pattern of faculty response rates following the first, second, and third email reminders from the honors program. While it is possible that individual faculty members simply adhere to idiosyncratic timelines in completing their end-of-term tasks, the variability in response rates might also reflect the final exam schedule, differences in teaching loads between terms, or even other factors such as fatigue or anticipation of the coming summer or winter breaks. Whether faculty submit their feedback following the first, second, or third, reminder, though, the data suggest that the convenience of the electronic rubric clearly increases the overall on-time response rate.

**TABLE 2. FACULTY RESPONSE RATE ON CONTRACT PROJECTS,  
FALL 2016–FALL 2018**

Term	1st Email Reminder	2nd Email Reminder	3rd Email Reminder	Total by Deadline	Outstanding at Deadline
FA16	18 (28.6%)	16 (25.4%)	22 (34.9%)	56 (88.9%)	7 (11.1%)
SP17	14 (19.4%)	20 (27.8%)	11 (15.3%)	45 (62.5%)	27 (37.5%)
FA17	27 (43.5%)	26 (41.9%)	8 (12.9%)	61 (98.3%)	1 (1.7%)
SP18	17 (27.4%)	25 (40.3%)	19 (30.6%)	61 (98.3%)	1 (1.7%)
FA18	22 (34.4%)	33 (51.6%)	7 (10.9%)	63 (96.9%)	2 (3.1%)

While the electronic project submission form and qualitative rubric have considerably simplified the contract process in its first year-and-a-half, the transition has not been seamless. Students and faculty who had completed or mentored contracts under the former process needed a little bit of coaching in moving through the new steps, and both groups helped to identify aspects of the new process that needed clarification. The most significant problems became apparent with the first round of project submissions by students. Students generally had little difficulty submitting projects using the electronic form; because of unclear language in the initial email reminders to students, however, they sometimes did not realize that their submissions reached only the honors program and not their respective faculty mentors. We updated the contract guidelines and clarified in the initial confirmation email to students their responsibility for transmitting projects to faculty, modifications that vastly improved the student submission process in spring 2018 and fall 2018. Several other minor logistical issues also arose in the first cycle. For instance, a few students and faculty had downloaded and saved the old contract form; not wanting to create duplicative work for either group, we granted one-time permission to submit either proposals or feedback using the outdated form.

While most of the feedback we have received from faculty has related to student work, we have also received a few comments on the process and requests for clarification. Of the 61 faculty members who submitted feedback at the end of the fall 2017 term, only four offered feedback on the contract process or sought guidance.<sup>2</sup> Two faculty members were unsure how to complete the form for students who did not finish proposed projects. This confusion may have arisen from the language explaining the form in the three reminder messages. Since we have revised this language for clarity, however, we have received no further questions about this issue. A third faculty member took issue with the deadline for student submission of the contract project, suggesting that the honors program had no authority to set due dates for non-honors classes. Because we do not wish to impinge upon faculty autonomy, the due date for contract projects is always our university's pre-finals preparation

day, or the day after regular class meetings end. Finally, one particularly technologically savvy faculty member suggested that every field except the rubric itself should self-populate to make the feedback process even more efficient for faculty. Such functionality is indeed desirable and may be a path we will pursue in the future.

## **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE REDESIGNED CONTRACT PROCESS**

Honors contracts rely heavily on the expertise of faculty to determine whether a given project ultimately merits honors credit. Because faculty receive no monetary compensation for mentoring contracts at UNR, we needed to create an efficient, user-friendly mechanism for gathering faculty feedback; the updated contract process is just such a mechanism. Under the former contract process, the request that faculty submit graded copies of student work prompted some faculty to provide in-depth feedback, but because we were not doing enough to facilitate feedback, most faculty interpreted the requirement for a “final grade” on the contract to mean simply a letter grade evaluating the project. While such grades can shape the contract process by evaluating the overall quality of the final product, they often do not capture or explain the pedagogical value of the contract experience. The new qualitative rubric shifts the focus away from numbers and toward specified learning outcomes like critical thinking and risk-taking. Even with minimal faculty engagement (that is, simply clicking through the rubric), this process significantly improves the quality of faculty feedback by tying the experience specifically to honors learning outcomes. The rubric also has led more faculty to complete, often in detail, an optional field for written comments.

Crucially, such comments may include information that the honors staff would be unlikely to learn through interactions with the students themselves. For example, one faculty member who supervised a spring 2018 contract indicated that the student’s work had been so successful that she had decided to offer him a position in her research lab, where he is currently completing a series

of experiments that have laid the groundwork for his honors senior thesis. While research activity would certainly have come up in this student's next advising appointment, the contract feedback focuses the conversation immediately on specifics. Of course, the more information an advisor has, the more productive the discussion is likely to be, and our modified contract process has positively affected advising. The kind of in-depth feedback we now routinely receive on contracts has the capacity both to enhance our work with students and to strengthen our relationships with faculty.

This new, more extensive faculty feedback is often surprisingly candid. While we certainly want students to engage with the qualitative rubric as they prepare their contract projects, they do not have access to the specific feedback their instructors provide to us via the online rubric. Individual faculty members may choose to share their evaluations with students, and many faculty members continue to offer additional feedback to students. Of course, the confidentiality of any information communicated to the honors program is both important to faculty members and useful to the honors program. In fall 2018, for example, three students opted to complete contract projects for a biochemistry course on the topic of metabolic regulation. The assignment developed by the instructor asked "students to take the fundamental knowledge gained from the class and apply it to a real-world problem in the form of a review paper." Feedback on the three completed papers ranged from praise for a "wonderfully written review of a topic related to, but outside the scope of, our class curriculum" (five excellent ratings) to acknowledgment of a solid paper containing "a number of typos and other minor errors" (three good and two excellent ratings) to acceptance of a "decent paper worthy of receiving honors credit" (four good ratings and one fair rating).

Owing to the individualized nature of honors contracts, even in cases such as this one where several students have completed comparable work, there is little pedagogical value in quantifying students' success relative to peers. Such information is better used to inform the individual mentoring delivered via honors teaching and advising. With reference to these three student papers, for

instance, the first student's next honors advising session might point to this successful research as an indicator that the student should consider pursuing graduate study in biochemistry; the second student's session might emphasize professionalism in research activity and highlight resources within and outside of honors, like the writing center, that could improve the student's performance; finally, the third student would benefit from a discussion of how progress toward proficiency in scientific research requires deep engagement with primary sources.

UNR's midsize honors program can provide such individualized advising for a majority of our students each term. These one-on-one meetings typically involve discussion of contract projects and courses. Smaller honors programs and colleges that process fewer contracts each term might wish to solicit even more detailed feedback than we do at UNR and to take a more hands-on approach to presenting such feedback to students; end-of-term meetings to discuss contract courses and projects alongside proposed learning outcomes would be one possibility. Although large honors programs and colleges might not have the administrative capacity to apply this feedback to individual student cases via advising or teaching, an automated process for collecting these data is nevertheless useful for assessing the interactions among students, faculty, and honors operations.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although the assessment and management of contract courses are challenging for both honors administrators and the faculty members who teach them, such courses are an important part of an honors curriculum seeking to preserve broad access amidst growing demand for honors education. At UNR, contracts constitute a vitally important component of the honors curriculum: they allow students to maintain consistent involvement with the honors program throughout their undergraduate careers. A readily available contract option ensures that students who need more than general education coursework from honors are not disadvantaged; rather, they can expand their honors experience to the broader range of

courses associated with their majors. With the automation of the assessment portion of our process, students have gained additional agency in the process by assuming the responsibility for submitting their completed contract projects to their faculty instructors and the honors program; faculty are able to submit their feedback quickly and easily; and a single honors administrator is able to oversee the process from beginning to end.

Whether UNR honors students record instructional videos, write critical essays, or conduct specialized experiments, the reimagined contract process allows the honors program to keep track of them all in a way that is minimally demanding of faculty members' time. Although we may not be able to provide monetary compensation or count work on honors contracts as part of teaching loads, we have streamlined the administrative tasks associated with contracts so that faculty can invest their time and energy in the part of the process where they can make the greatest positive impact on students: providing the individualized mentorship that is a hallmark of the honors contract experience. Significantly, as a result of the changes made to the contract process, honors faculty and administrators are better informed about students' work in contract courses outside of the stand-alone honors curriculum and, consequently, better equipped to apply their enhanced knowledge of student performance in ways that help students to make progress as scholars in both the honors program and their majors.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Figures for students and courses are not unduplicated. That is, in some of the 618 courses, multiple honors students completed individual contracts. Once again, this occurrence was most frequent in STEM courses common to several majors.

<sup>2</sup>Of the 61 faculty members who submitted feedback at the end of spring 2018, none contacted the honors program regarding the process, possibly because the procedural feedback received following fall 2017 had already improved the process. Queries at the end of fall 2018 were most often about submitting feedback for multiple

students in the same course who may have worked together on a contract project.

[The UNR Honors Program became an honors college in July 2020.]

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Moving Honors Contracts into the Digital Age: Processes, Impacts, and Opinions

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As Richard Badenhausen argues, a foundational quality of honors education is its ability to place gifted students in direct contact with each other and outstanding faculty in honors courses. The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) defines honors education as “characterized by in-class and extracurricular activities that are measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences,” built upon a “distinctive learner-directed environment and philosophy” that is “tailored to fit the institution’s culture and mission” and designed to create a “close community of students and faculty” (“Definition”). This premise for honors education seems to spell the downfall of honors contracts, even though many honors programs and colleges rely on them to increase retention, reduce attrition, and raise graduation numbers, all statistics tied to administrative funding. Although honors students are not necessarily in direct contact with one another during

the contract process, we believe that contracts facilitate the high-impact one-on-one faculty interaction that is critical to the learning process. To make this experience possible for the approximately 2,000 honors students at Auburn University, our honors college moved in fall 2015 from paper to digital contracts, streamlining the logistics of the contract process for honors students, faculty, and staff. The benefits and impact of that change are the focus of our argument in this chapter.

In addition to reducing human error in a paper process that allowed contracts to be misplaced or overlooked as they moved through the approval process, even within the honors college office itself, the digital process has created for honors advisors databases of all past digital contracts, searchable by course and faculty mentor's name. This change has led to more proactive advising about innovative approaches to contracts and increased access to examples before students even meet with faculty. This advising includes database searches for advisees interested in exploring previous contract options prior to a one-on-one advising appointment, contracting workshops for faculty and students, and specialized group sessions focused on contracting. During one-on-one appointments, the advisors can then work with students to hone contract ideas in relation to the student's and faculty mentor's interests. Initially built to reduce error and eliminate paperwork, the digital contracting process has thus substantially improved both the functionality and quality of contracts for students and faculty. Honors advisors and faculty agree that this new process has raised the quality as well as the creativity of students' initial contract proposals to faculty. We expect these improvements to continue and grow once we finish installing a searchable database that our students can access through their student portal.

We designed the digital contracting process using an existing university-supported system and its on-campus support staff. This system tracks contracts at each stage of approval, making it easy for all parties involved, including students, to follow up on—and thus to communicate effectively about—individual contracts. In addition, the system generates a report of all contracts started in a

semester so that staff can use a single list to track and process completed contracts. The digital system automatically sends certified contracts to the Registrar's office to be added to the student's transcript, a task that had traditionally been completed manually by honors advisors. This user-friendly, accurate system allows students access to updated official and unofficial transcripts much earlier than previously, facilitating their applications for such opportunities as prestigious scholarships, graduate school, and professional positions.

These changes are critical because most of our students would be unable to complete their honors college requirements without contracts. By moving contracts into the digital space that our students, in particular, enjoy so much, we have fostered greater innovation in contract material as well as deeper mentoring relationships between faculty and students. We are well aware that faculty mentoring is critical to the success of contracting. Although faculty are unpaid for contract work at our institution, the digital process allows for greater faculty involvement in guiding contracts and better experiences for both faculty and students, especially at the beginning and end of the process. These mentoring relationships are of particular value to faculty who see the aptitude of honors students as on par with that of graduate students. Especially for junior faculty, these relationships with talented undergraduates offer valuable experience working one-on-one with talented students on a sustained mini-project. This chapter provides the insights of our honors college, our faculty, and their department chairs on both our previous and current contract processes in order to demonstrate the value of the changes we have made and to offer our case study as a model for other institutions.

## **AUBURN UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE DEMOGRAPHICS**

The Auburn University Honors Program was founded in 1979, became a college in 1998, and currently enrolls just under 2,000 students. During the time period discussed in this chapter (fall 2012–spring 2018), the admissions criteria were an ACT score of 29 (or equivalent SAT) and at least a 3.85 high school GPA. The

majority of students in our honors college major in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (an average of 73% of students in each cohort within the study period of fall 2012–spring 2018).

Auburn University is a large public research and land-grant university with almost 24,000 undergraduates spread across 14 schools and colleges and over 140 majors. Auburn undergraduates may earn one of two distinctions or designations from the honors college: 1) University Honors Scholar, which requires a minimum 3.4 GPA at graduation and the successful completion of 30 honors hours, or 2) Honors Scholar, requiring a 3.2 GPA and 24 honors hours. Both distinctions allow students to take up to 12 graduate hours that will count as honors hours. This option is designed for juniors and seniors who may not wish to pursue a contract or prefer to sample the higher-level learning of a graduate seminar. We should clearly note here that only honors or graduate work done or articulated at Auburn counts toward completion; we do not give honors credit for AP, IB, or any other high school courses or experiences.

Honors contracts enable students to earn honors credit by incorporating an honors component within a regularly offered non-honors class. Students may develop honors contracts in core courses that do not have an honors version or that pose specific scheduling conflicts for particular students; they may also be proposed in courses required to complete a student's college curriculum model. Additionally, no pass/fail (i.e., S/U) course or physical education courses can be contracted. All other undergraduate courses (one-credit minimum; six-credit maximum) are eligible to be contracted; the intensity of the contract requirements is proportional to the number of credits associated with the regular course. Contracts can only be completed for courses for which students are currently registered, and any honors student in good standing is eligible to participate. This good-standing requirement, for the most part, automatically eliminates students in their first semester in honors except under special circumstances when, at the discretion of the honors college and faculty mentor, a first-semester student may be

allowed to contract. Most importantly for us, a major outcome for students in their first semester of honors is to build community through several pathways, including enrollment in small honors seminar courses. In contrast, building honors course offerings in departments/colleges where we have the bulk of our upper-division honors students, including in the College of Engineering and the College of Sciences and Mathematics, is especially difficult because of budget limitations and strict course requirements in those majors. There are no restrictions on the number of courses that students can contract for in either the 30- or the 24-credit track. Thus, contracts are a necessity that we have tried to turn into a virtue.

### **HISTORY OF CONTRACTS**

The Auburn University Honors College adopted course contracting as an option in the late 1990s. The process ran in paper form until fall 2015, when we developed our digital process. From the start, we have framed contracts to our students not as add-ons but rather as precursors, almost prerequisites, to the independent work done with a faculty member during the Honors Research and Thesis courses. Recognizing Auburn's status as a Research I institution, the honors college has strived to use the contract process to provide mini-research experiences for students. Although Badenhausen reminds readers that contracts can hamper the development of honors students, we believe in the value of independent guided work under the tutelage of a faculty member, even if collaborative honors-only classroom environments are ideal and important.

Department chairs typically recognize the value of honors contracts in drawing more and better undergraduate students into their majors and/or minors, but to ensure that department chairs, especially new ones, understand the honors college's expectations about contracts, we provide them with concrete examples of what we would like to see in contracts from their faculty. They appreciate the collaboration between high-caliber undergraduates and their outstanding faculty on complex research and creative works, and they often convey their enthusiasm for this collaboration to

their faculty. We also remind administrators that contracts must be guided by faculty with terminal degrees and that any contract can be denied by the director of the honors college. Furthermore, to encourage high-quality independent work throughout the contracting process, we regularly 1) present at new department chair and faculty orientations, 2) host student information sessions on contracting, and 3) facilitate meetings between students and faculty by the end of the semester before they plan to engage in a contract. Eligible faculty at Auburn are generally elated to be asked to guide a contract because, like faculty anywhere, they recognize the significance of student interest in their areas of teaching and research expertise. The promise of collaboration with these students has historically proven incentive enough to engage first-time faculty in an honors contract, particularly because of the widely recognized quality of honors contract work at our institution. Many of our faculty find these positive mentoring experiences to be rewarding outcomes of guiding honors contracts.

## **THE HONORS CONTRACTING PROCESS**

### **Paper**

This process ran successfully for over 15 years. It should be noted, however, that when this process was initiated, the honors college was still an honors program and served only 200 students. After contracts were approved or certified by the faculty member, the student and faculty mentor were responsible for returning the signed bottom of the form to the honors office. At the end of the semester, a collated list of all the certified contracts was sent to the Registrar's office, where staff would then individually assign honors categorization to each student's contracted course for transcript purposes. Because no timeline existed for this work to be completed, honors advisors as well as students were often frustrated. After contracts were sent to the Registrar's office, honors advisors were responsible for entering those contracts into Auburn DegreeWorks, a student recruiting and retention software that is also a degree-auditing and degree-tracking tool. It allows students

to track their academic progress toward their degrees, review the requirements for their academic affiliations, and devise scenarios to explore different ways of meeting all remaining requirements to graduate on schedule. Obviously, DegreeWorks must be updated in a timely manner for honors students to be able to plan properly. Because honors contracts had to be entered individually by honors advisors in DegreeWorks, that task could not be completed before the honors categorization was on the transcript. The problem was that students and honors advisors had to wait for the Registrar's office to process each term's contracts before they could enter those contracts into DegreeWorks. Because most Auburn students plan their degree path in DegreeWorks and never look at their unofficial transcripts online, many honors students who had fulfilled their contracts were coming into the honors college in a panic because they were not finding credit toward their honors requirements in the system.

The major administrative benefits to this paper process included its low cost and the relatively low number of full-time employee (FTE) hours needed to initiate and execute contracts. Drawbacks, however, included:

1. often unreliable routing of paper from office to office, usually via campus mail;
2. a substantial burden on students to ensure delivery of contracts to the honors office by set deadlines;
3. barriers to contract initiation, such as the requirement for students to meet with and obtain signatures from the faculty mentor and the appropriate department chair; and
4. problems with undocumented load or overload teaching since departments were not required to track contracts, especially since honors does not pay faculty for this work.

## Digital

Since the early 2000s, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) has promoted the need to go paperless in student

services to increase compliance with FERPA requirements. To align our approach with that of the other colleges on campus, we transitioned to electronic folders for our honors students in summer 2016 in preparation for a fall 2016 launch. This moment invited a transition to digital honors contracts as well so that we could further reduce the amount of sensitive student information moving across campus in paper form. To create a workflow process for honors contracts, Auburn University's Office of Informational Technology, Registrar's office, and Honors College talked for over a year prior to the fall 2015 roll-out. The talks among these three units structured the change; we discussed:

1. the needs of both the Registrar's office and the honors college in this process;
2. the timeline to beta testing;
3. the key personnel who would lead the project;
4. training for the employees who would be integral to the new process; and
5. procedures to get help from the Office of Informational Technology and Registrar's office once the system went live in fall 2015.

Based on the meetings of these three offices, and in conjunction with the decision in the Provost's office to make heightened security for student files a key issue, Auburn allocated staff assistance in external offices at no cost to help make this change for the honors college.

The key to our digital contract process is Banner's WorkFlow, which is an add-on to Banner, the popular and ubiquitous student information system. Banner is the central information system for faculty and student services staff at Auburn, and WorkFlow is housed in the main faculty/staff and student portals, giving everyone easy access. WorkFlow operates precisely in accordance with the dictionary definition of "workflow," offering a "sequence of industrial, administrative, or other processes through which a piece of work passes from initiation to completion."

The process is relatively simple. Once the contract has been designed and proposed by the student, in collaboration with the mentor, an honors advisor initiates the WorkFlow process, moving the contract by automatically generated email to the specific people who need to approve it. The professor is the first to receive the contract via email; of course the student is copied. At this point, the professor reviews the contract for accuracy and agreed-upon content, with the choices of denying the contract, approving the contract, or adding contract details to the contract and then approving it. Once the faculty member modifies and/or approves the contract, it moves directly to the student. Students are able to review the contract details and approve or deny the contract. Denial from either party at this early stage will generate an email that informs the honors advisor. Contracts approved by both parties move on to the department chair, whose approval triggers messages to the honors director, professor, student, and honors advisor, with the approved contract attached as a pdf. The system generates a denial message if the department chair does not approve the contract.

Near the end of the semester, WorkFlow generates an instructional email to the professor, indicating how to certify or deny contract completion. Once the professor chooses one of those two options, the system generates another email to the honors director, the honors advisor, the professor, and the student, informing all parties whether or not the contract was certified. If the contract is certified as complete, a separate and more detailed email is sent to the Registrar's office. This notification also starts the automatic, real-time update of the honors categorization of the course on the student's transcript, a process no longer completed manually by staff in the Registrar's office. Furthermore, because honors advisors are connected to the process in real time, they can add the honors categorization in DegreeWorks much earlier than they could in the past. In addition to these benefits, we know that our students' academic records are considerably more secure and protected now than with the paper system that routed sensitive information through campus mail.

The substantial benefits of this process include the following:

1. Students, through their honors advisors, understand at all times where their contracts are in the approval process.
2. Students can cancel a contract, knowing that faculty will be notified, rather than simply not completing a paper contract at the end of the semester.
3. Honors advisors can pull reports throughout the semester (but most crucially during the first and final days of each semester) to determine which students, faculty, and/or department chairs need encouragement to continue the process.
4. Honors collects digital records of all contracts, which we use as examples in advising students about contracts that have earned approval in the past.
5. Honors staff can assist individual faculty with WorkFlow problems since we can see timestamps indicating where and why approval is delayed.
6. Honors can easily send interested or new faculty anonymized examples of successful contracts, strengthening the quality of proposed work and enriching the collaboration between faculty members and students.
7. Honors administrators are able to provide data to departments on contracting productivity and courses that are frequently contracted to initiate talks about creating honors versions of popular courses. Department chairs appreciate having this information to add to their internal impact reports for their respective deans.

The digital process quite clearly allows for a higher level of communication and interaction among honors advisors, students, faculty, and department chairs than the paper process ever could. One result has been more collaboration in the early stages of designing contracts, which is producing honors contracts that are likely to earn approval by both the department chair and honors director.

Another is that because all parties can see where the contract is in the process at all times, contract approvals tend to move more efficiently; when they stall, direct communication is both expected and simple.

The decision to move toward a digital process was motivated by both pedagogical needs and the following key administrative reasons:

1. New budget model adopted by Auburn University;
2. Institutional move to paperless student files and record keeping; and
3. Limited available resources, including FTE hours, in essential units.

The new budget model has also incentivized departments to create more courses, especially core/general education courses, which in turn increase departmental teaching responsibilities for current faculty. Because this change jeopardized both the development of new honors courses and the willingness of faculty to do more work with honors contracts, we clearly needed to institutionalize an easier process to minimize the workload for faculty and department chairs if we hoped to maintain existing partnerships. This need was especially clear since faculty who taught honors courses or guided at least one honors contract per term previously earned the title of “Honors Faculty,” but that practice was discontinued in 1996 by a new provost. This title has never been reinstated, leaving the honors college with little leverage to engage departments and faculty vis-a-vis honors contracts. The eagerness of faculty to engage in honors contracts, despite the lack of institutional recognition or monetary support, underscores the value they find in contracts.

Despite the clear benefits of the new digital process, particularly for students and honors college staff, not all faculty and department chairs agreed with our decision to change. Overwhelmingly, honors students have loved the ease of routing contracts through approvers and the capacity to keep everyone in this approval loop. Their biggest challenge remains at the front end: coming up with ideas for contracts before taking any related classes or creating contracts

with professors from whom they have never taken courses. Honors attempted to provide more sample contracts in STEM and non-STEM fields online beginning in fall 2016, along with information about how to approach professors concerning contracts. With the new process, we decided to overhaul our contracting webpage to include specific information for both students and faculty. The webpage shows how we have simplified the process for students through timed steps, access to sample contracts, and templates for email to faculty. These changes have led to better prepared students and more productive appointments with honors advisors as students prepare to contract. Similarly, faculty can familiarize themselves with the WorkFlow process before engaging in a contract and use the webpage to review those steps as needed. (For more information, see [honors.auburn.edu/contracts](http://honors.auburn.edu/contracts).)

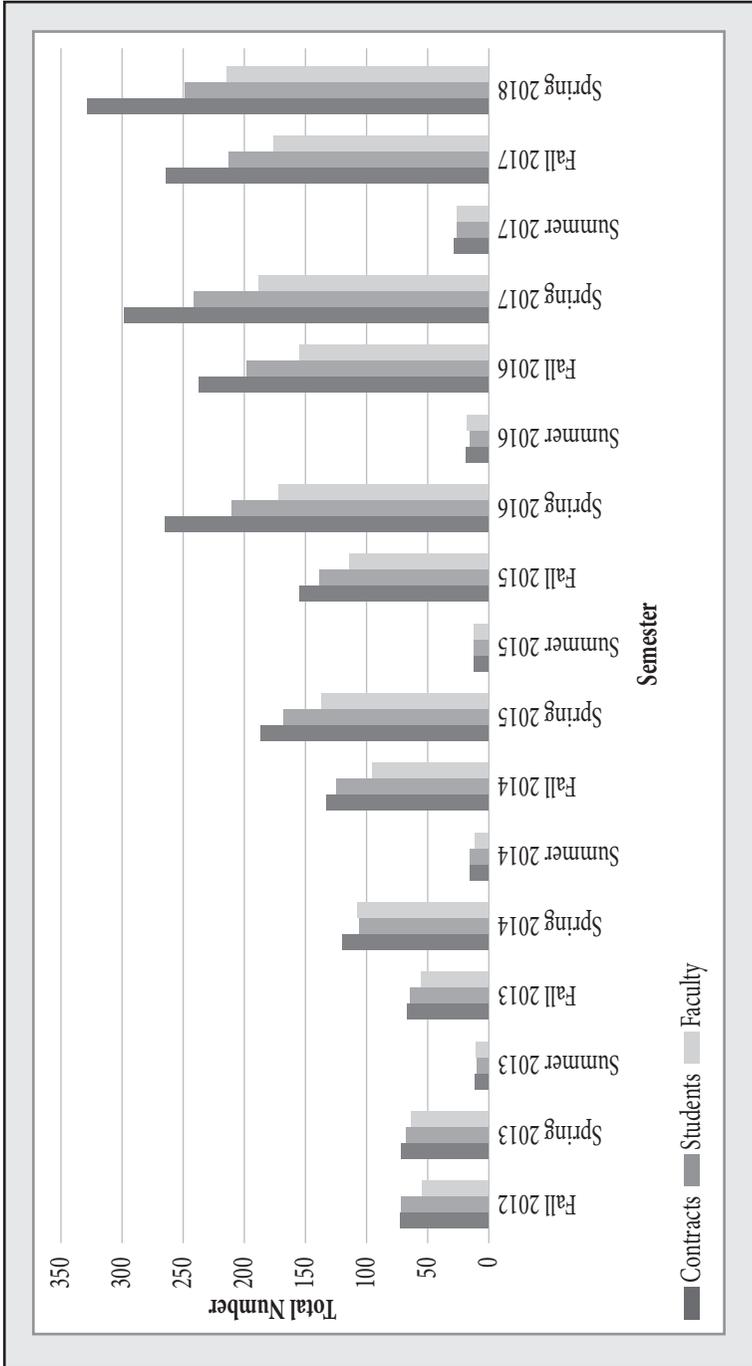
## CONTRACTS BY THE NUMBERS

Because of the many iterations of the paper form and the curriculum since the late 1990s, we have decided to compare only the final three years of paper contracts (fall 2012 through summer 2015) to the first three years of digital contracts that have been completed to date (fall 2015 through spring 2018). The forms and curricula in both periods have remained constant.

Figure 1 illustrates the total number of contracts, students, and faculty members involved in both paper and digital formats for this study's period. These comparisons were made on a per capita basis to normalize the data for variations such as first-year class sizes and numbers of graduates. Figure 1 demonstrates a clear increase in the number of contracts, students, and faculty involved when we transitioned from paper to the digital WorkFlow format. To prove statistically the relationship between the switch to the digital process and increases in contract numbers, student engagement, and faculty involvement in the contracting process, we completed paired t-tests with results of  $p = 0.004$ , strong evidence of the impact that this digital process has made.

Figure 1 shows that during the last years of the paper system, the rate of growth of the number of faculty members participating in

**FIGURE 1. PAPER (FALL 2012–SUMMER 2015) AND DIGITAL (FALL 2015–SPRING 2018) CONTRACT COMPARISON**



contracts decreased from semester to semester, despite the increase in the number of students engaged in contract work. We again used hypothesis testing to determine whether or not the digital contracting process actually deterred faculty from agreeing to contracts that they might have accepted with the paper process. We found statistical significance ( $p = 0.002$ ) in the hypothesis that the digital process deterred some faculty from adopting and executing honors contracts. Interestingly, our metadata suggest that although the total number of faculty grew at a slower rate with the digital than with the paper process, a larger number of faculty were now willing to engage in multiple contracts per semester, especially when they had never before mentored an honors contract. Those data also indicate that more honors students were willing to complete at least two contracts in one semester in the digital semesters than the paper semesters: the average increase in the number of students engaged in two contracts is 41%. This outcome is a positive one because students are making better progress toward completing their honors curriculum. The data do not reveal any statistically significant harm to students' performance in the contracts or reported quality of the contract work of students when completing two or more contracts in one semester. Thus, regardless of the slower growth in faculty numbers, the synergy between faculty willingness to offer more contracts and student willingness to undertake more honors contracts during the digital semesters has definitely helped to retain our juniors and seniors.

The data for both paper and digital contracts were extremely noisy when broken down by college per capita per semester, nullifying all statistical analyses of the impact of the process by college. Nevertheless, one major revelation was that the digital process led to an average increase of 38% in the number of faculty allowing contracts in STEM courses in comparison to the paper process. This finding is of absolute significance to us since the majority of our honors students are in STEM fields. Furthermore, the new faculty who became engaged in leading contracts once the digital process was in place were predominantly junior faculty at the assistant professor rank (87%). We see this finding as a positive outcome

of the digital process: assistant professors are likely to continue working with honors as they advance in their careers, and they also tend to be quite focused on their research, which can lead to honors contracts that provide students with transformative research-based experiences. In many cases, assistant professors have asked certain honors students to join their research teams after completing contracts with these strong undergraduate researchers.

Contracts are not, and have never been, a requirement of the Auburn University Honors College curriculum. Nevertheless, they are critical to the completion of honors hours and graduation with honors for many Auburn students, as they are for honors students at many institutions. Because both nursing and education students, for example, have strict curricula that send students away from campus for professional training, relatively few of them accept a place in the honors college; for those who do, their retention in honors has been historically low. Table 1 summarizes the impact of the contracting processes on nursing and education students. That every nursing and education student who has graduated from fall 2012 to spring 2018 completed at least two contracts during their junior and/or

**TABLE 1. HONORS CONTRACTS AND GRADUATION RATES IN SCHOOL OF NURSING AND COLLEGE OF EDUCATION**

	Nursing	Education
<i>Fall 2012–Summer 2015 (Paper)</i>		
Average % completed contracts	37.6	53.1
Average graduation rate	13.9	21.7
% of graduating class at higher honors distinction	0.425	1.36
<i>Fall 2015–Spring 2018 (Digital)</i>		
Average % completed contracts	89.7	94.3
Average graduation rate	44.2	71.4
% of graduating class at higher honors distinction	3.81	11.8
<i>Percent Change</i>		
Average % completed contracts	52.1	41.2
Average graduation rate	30.3	49.7
% of graduating class at higher honors distinction	3.4	10.4

senior years is worth noting. The data in Table 1 indicate a strong correlation for nursing and education students between the digital format and the chances of completing those contracts, retention in the honors college, and graduation with the higher honors distinction. T-testing confirms the significance of the digital contracting process in the success of nursing and education students persisting through the honors college curriculum ( $p = 0.001$ ).

### **FACULTY VIEWS ON PAPER AND DIGITAL CONTRACTING PROCESSES**

In order to gauge the views of the faculty and department chairs on the honors contracting process, 313 active faculty members and department chairs who have been involved in the digital contracts process were asked to participate in a brief survey. (Readers interested in more detail should contact the authors for a copy of this internal survey instrument.) The anonymous survey was administered electronically through Qualtrics® in summer 2018. There were 62 respondents: 52 faculty members and 10 department chairs (~20% response rate). Of those 62 respondents, 28 had also completed paper contracts prior to fall 2015. Of those 28, only 4 (14%) were critical of the paper contract process. Two of those four offered reasons for dissatisfaction: 1) department chair: “Not being available when forms needed to be signed”; 2) faculty member: “I would forget to do them—the email reminder is nice.” On average, all 28 of the respondents who worked with paper and digital contracts rated the ease of the paper contracting process at 71.29 on a scale of 0 (extremely difficult) to 100 (extremely easy). When all 62 respondents were asked about problems with the digital process, 13 (20%) were critical of the process. Despite these issues, all respondents, on average, rated the digital (WorkFlow) contracting process at 81.02 on the 0-to-100 ease-of-use scale. Appendices A and B include all comments, positive and negative, of faculty and department chairs on this digital contracting process.

While only 10 department chairs responded to the survey, none of them left a positive comment. Several, in fact, made negative comments that demand honors college attention, including topics such as the following:

1. **revision:** “Would be good to have an option for revision so that the contract can be re-routed [to the originators] and then back to head/chair”;
2. **deadlines:** “There should be strict deadlines the first few weeks of the semester for submission of the contracts”; and
3. **process clarity:** “No[t] knowing where request originates, who fills out various parts. Not clear why it comes through the grade-change Workflow.”

Department chairs play a critical role in the contracting process since they decide whether their faculty can mentor honors contracts. The honors college is therefore committed to resolving these concerns in the near future by updating the information sent through the Workflow system to faculty, students, and department chairs.

Of the faculty who left positive comments, 75% of them who completed paper contracts before fall 2015 prefer the digital mode, despite the fact that 24 of 27 expressed no problems with the paper contracting process. Some clear examples of positive faculty comments included the following: 1) “I prefer the digital contract. It works great”; 2) “Easy. Efficient”; and 3) “This process has been relatively easy to manage—much easier [than] via paperwork.” Most of the negative comments can be categorized into two areas: software and training. Since little can be done about the actual software that we use for the process, our efforts will focus on developing more detailed and intuitive training materials for faculty members and department chairs in the hope of creating better faculty experiences with honors contracts in the future.

## CONCLUSIONS

The digital contracting process has been embraced enthusiastically by honors students and staff but not so positively by department chairs and faculty. As suggested earlier, honors advisors now have digital databases of past contracts to access when helping students develop their contract ideas prior to meetings with potential faculty mentors. Students really enjoy this preparatory information as

well as the ease and transparency of the digital system. Moreover, our advisors have found that contracting discussions with students are now much deeper and more clearly focused because the intimidation factor of having to approach a faculty member without any contract ideas is now greatly diminished. Advisors are often amazed by the novel and innovative contract ideas of students who have studied past contracts from a particular course or with a specific faculty mentor. Advisors have found that the digital process transforms students' dislike of paperwork into the thrill of imagining new contract ideas. We believe that preparing students more effectively to present innovative contract ideas to faculty will continue to result in more eager mentors leading more productive contracts for more students.

Like most technology-driven processes, our system needs ongoing improvement to facilitate the engagement of users, particularly faculty and department chairs in this case. Their buy-in is crucial since honors contracts depend upon faculty and department chair support. Faculty members who have experienced both paper and digital contracts prefer the digital process, suggesting that more training and direction might make this digital process even more appealing to all. Over time, particularly as we continue to gather assessment data, administrators will see clear benefits to this system. Most significantly, this new digital WorkFlow process has helped with what matters most: retention of honors students through to completion.

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## APPENDIX A

### Positive Comments: Department Chairs and Faculty on Paper and Digital Contracts

Role in Process	Free Response Comment
<i>Paper and Digital Involvement</i>	
Faculty	I prefer the digital contract. It works great.
Faculty	I like the WorkFlow procedure much better.
Faculty	Both worked fine. I like the digital version for the course description, because it is easier to type rather than handwrite.
Faculty	I prefer the digital contracting in WorkFlow.
Faculty	Easy. Efficient.
Faculty	This process has been relatively easy to manage—much easier [than] via paperwork.
<i>Digital Involvement Only</i>	
Faculty	It is great. Thanks!
Faculty	Definitely keep the digital contract process and web site!

## APPENDIX B

### Negative Comments: Department Chairs and Faculty on Paper and Digital Contracts

Role in Process	Free Response Comment
<i>Paper and Digital Involvement</i>	
Faculty	I was not able to provide feedback—just a grade, if I remember correctly.
Faculty	WorkFlow wouldn't open.
Department Chair	There should be strict deadline the first few weeks of the semester for submission of the contracts. The contracts come through the WorkFlow for many weeks into the semester.
<i>Digital Involvement Only</i>	
Faculty	I am likely not to offer honors contracting again for CHEM 1030. CHEM 1030 differs greatly from 1117 in classroom environment, material, and responsibilities. I'm not sure there can be one project in CHEM 1030 that can replicate [having] the honors cohort-environment present, and unfortunately, I can't cover the more advanced material that students see in 1117.
Faculty	I was not aware there was a course contract web page. Perhaps a short online tutorial for new professors working with the process.
Department Chair	Would be good to have an option for revision so that the contract can be re-routed for revision and then back to head/chair.
Faculty	It wasn't clear to me when a form had been submitted. I actually had to do it twice.
Faculty	I have some confusion about the fact that I needed to submit to approve. The wording seemed confusing.
Faculty	The format of the assignments after entered were difficult to read for the student. Not sure if this was the system or my fault.

Faculty	I was not very familiar with the WorkFlow process—this was the third time I had to use WorkFlow, but the first time for honors. Although I can get through WorkFlow with the instructions, the WorkFlow process is not very intuitive, and I have to work through the instructions each time. In this case, I thought I had completed the WorkFlow, but it apparently had not saved, and I was late completing the contract because it never “completed.”
Faculty	The student was not clear on the process.
Department Chair	The problem I had was there was no way to send the contract back for revision (to the faculty member who initiated it). Your only options are [to] approve or deny. So, if you determine that revisions need to be made, your only option is to reject, which causes alarm to the student and faculty member.
Faculty	The digital WorkFlow process is too confusing. There is nothing intuitive about it, and instructions are hard to find.
Faculty	Could not edit once submitted. Had to cancel and start over again. Students were confused and panicked. Edit was required based on chair feedback. Would be nice to have that feature.
Department Chair	No[t] knowing where request originates, who fills out various parts. Not clear why it comes through the grade-change WorkFlow. Still no clarity from honors about whom they want contracting for honors courses. Not clear at all that students receive any advice on appropriate honors instructors (or courses).
Faculty	Needs a better notification process and more intuitive user interface.
Faculty	At first, it was hard to tell if something went through. I seem to remember having to retype submissions before they “took” in the system.
Faculty	Final submission process was somewhat ambiguous. I thought I had made final submission, when in fact I had not.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# Honors in Practice: Beyond the Classroom

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Six years ago, in my first week as director of the Utah State University (USU) Honors Program, a senior physics major and her frustrated faculty mentor marched into my office. The student was shy and embarrassed, the mentor surly and blunt: “Why,” he asked, “must a senior complete an honors contract in a class that isn’t fundamentally shaping her future?” Good question. Because students were required to earn honors credits each term at USU, the choice facing this student was whether to enroll in an honors general education course she did not need or to develop a contract to deepen the work of a non-honors course only tangentially related to her impressive research agenda. The problem was that she had completed her major coursework and was just fulfilling some remaining requirements as she focused outside the classroom on her true academic passions: multi-messenger astronomy, measurement of ambient light pollution, and public science education. She had

recently applied for and won a Goldwater Scholarship for research coupling electromagnetic and gravitational astronomy. She was also collaborating with local city officials to measure and propose solutions to a growing light-pollution problem in our northern Utah valley and volunteering for a range of public science education programs on campus. As she explained how her research, Goldwater application, and community engagement connected to each other, this shy and embarrassed student became animated and expansive, moving me to rethink honors contract rules. If a contract involved additional faculty-mentored academic work beyond course requirements, why did that work have to be connected to a particular course and mentored by its instructor? Indeed, bringing one's curiosity to life—whether through engagement with undergraduate research and creative work, applications for national scholarships and fellowships, or development of collaborative community partnerships—quite clearly defines honors education, in or outside of the classroom.

Around the same time period, the value of active curiosity also shaped the choice of a new USU Honors Program motto, drawn from the poet Horace: "*Sapere aude*," or "Dare to Know." Horace's challenge has become fundamental to Western intellectual history, with notable references by Immanuel Kant—whose 1784 essay "What is Enlightenment?" tied the dare to the liberating power of expansive political reasoning—and Michel Foucault—whose 1984 response (also titled "What is Enlightenment?") critiqued such power with a post-structural examination of the individual subject through a "historical ontology of ourselves" (45). In every case, the dare to know is a challenge not simply to absorb information passively but to pursue knowledge actively with a deep, infectious curiosity. Crucial to honors education here is the fact that curiosity is by definition uncool: it bids one to burn. Honors can and should legitimate such ardor with a curricular license to learn, a mandate to explore academic passions both in and outside the classroom. Richard Badenhausen, this collection's friendly dissenter, warns that contracts risk invalidating the license when they neglect crucial training and curricular support for that mandate: honors programs

and colleges must take responsibility, he rightly contends, for building an intentional honors community, embedding and assessing clear learning outcomes, ensuring both faculty and student equity, and establishing through these practices their own place within campus leadership (5). This concluding chapter counters the charge that contracts are potentially counter-curricular with a reframing question: what if we could productively expand the curriculum by redefining both classroom and community in honors education?

The honors curriculum at Utah State University (USU) was designed specifically to expand those definitions, and the program marks student progress by awarding a total of twenty-eight honors points, which students earn for completion of both credit-bearing honors coursework and faculty-mentored experiential learning outside the classroom. Honors points are visible to both students and advisors in USU's Canvas learning management system, where the honors program has developed a self-paced, cohort-based site that allows assignment uploads and evaluation, points awarding and tracking, and follow-up advising messages. With faculty approval, students prepare themselves for a required capstone project by completing honors courses and experiential contracts, both of which typically earn three honors points. This flexible point-based curriculum values and integrates learning within and without the classroom, a benefit particularly important for our land-grant institution. Gary Wyatt rightly suggests in Chapter Nine that "the alignment of activities with institutional mission documents is an excellent strategy for honors programs and colleges" (202). Aligning itself with USU's mission "to be one of the nation's premier student-centered land-grant and space-grant universities by fostering the principle that academics come first, by cultivating diversity of thought and culture, and by serving the public through learning, discovery, and engagement" (Mission Statement), the honors program includes flexible mentoring agreements (contracts) in its student-centered curriculum to empower talented students from all backgrounds to learn, discover, and engage beyond the walls of the traditional classroom. The program frames these agreements as "Honors in Practice" (HIP) and structures them with clear learning

outcomes that demand mentored honors engagement in the university and local communities. Regardless of course schedules in a given term, honors students can follow their curiosity, putting academic knowledge into practice as they collaborate with faculty and peers on research, creative work, and community-engaged learning.

This approach expands the definitions of both classroom and community. A recent *Atlantic* essay by David Coleman cites a 2014 Gallup/Purdue poll indicating that only three percent of college students have the “types of experiences that ‘strongly relate to great jobs and great lives afterward’: a great teacher and mentor, intensive engagement in activities outside class, and in-depth study and application of ideas.” As high-impact practices at the heart of honors education, engagement beyond the classroom and application of ideas define USU’s HIP experience; this work prepares students to lead the “great lives” that Coleman describes by teaching them to make ideas tangible and actionable for the greater good. Recognizing the dependence of such work on the guidance of what Coleman calls “a great teacher and mentor” and the cost of valuable faculty time, the USU Honors Program has collaborated with the faculty senate and central administration to develop a standardized form with personalized data about faculty honors work; this honors *curriculum vitae* is institutionally recognized in the promotion and tenure process. (See Appendix A.) Honors has also forged other partnerships on and off campus that situate the program, its faculty, and honors students as campus and community leaders who embody USU’s land-grant mission by putting academic ideas into practice. Stretching the limits of both the classroom and the campus community, USU’s HIP empowers students and faculty alike to accept the honors program’s challenge: dare to know.

As the conclusion of a book that maps the history and charts innovative new territory for honors contracts, this chapter aims not to repeat but to synthesize and expand upon the work of preceding chapters. As we have seen, Myers and Whitebread’s careful grounding of contract pedagogy in the history of tutorial education contextualizes a pedagogical practice that Dotter and Hageman

then politicize; their two chapters argue in different ways that contracts create equity and access essential to honors education. These outcomes depend upon the rich, mutually beneficial contract relationships between students and faculty explored in detail by Bambina, Ticknor and Khan, and Snyder and Weisberg. Moving from individual experience to administrative practice, Haseleu and Taylor, Wyatt, Edgington, and Thomas and Hunter all describe how these potentially transformative pedagogical tools might be thoughtfully institutionalized and assessed with clear learning outcomes, streamlined processes, and programmatic oversight. This concluding chapter challenges the conventional definition of contracts as course-based learning with the goal of opening up new possibilities for honors contracts and further discussion about how they might be integrated into honors curricula in creative, functional ways.

### **CASE STUDY:**

#### **HONORS IN PRACTICE AT UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY**

As the state's land-grant institution, USU aims to make education accessible by bringing knowledge to life for students, faculty, staff, community stakeholders, and the general public. The university's and honors program's demographics reflect both their rural Utah location and an institutional commitment to statewide and regional access. Over the past three years (2017–2020), USU has enrolled an average of 24,722 undergraduates statewide; 16,115 of these students have sought four-year bachelor's degrees on the main (Logan) campus served by the honors program. During this period, 17% of undergraduates on this campus self-identified as first-generation college students, and 10% as underrepresented minorities (URM). Making up about 5% of this main-campus undergraduate population, the honors community of 727 students was a bit more than half as diverse as the institution overall: 10% of all honors students identified as first-generation, and 6% as URM between 2017–2020. Like many other honors programs and colleges, the USU Honors Program has begun the work of creating

more “holistic admissions protocols” to address this inequity (Jones 43), with some success: on average, 12% of the incoming cohort of first-year honors students identified as first-generation and 7% as URM during this three-year period.

The inequity, however, extends well beyond recruitment. The recent NCHC monograph *Occupy Honors Education* (2017), like its precursor *Setting the Table for Diversity* (2010), lays down a challenge for honors educators to combat what Harris and Bensimon have identified as higher education’s “failure to recognize that one’s best practices may not be effective with students who are not familiar with the hidden curriculum of how to be a successful college student” (80), a problem that Badenhausen raises and Dotter and Hageman, in particular, address in this volume. The USU Honors Program has begun to question its own hidden curriculum, to recognize that especially the incoming first-year cohort is “more likely to come from backgrounds of relative privilege as compared to their non-honors peers” (Dziesinski, Camarena, and Homrich-Knieling 83), and thus to train honors faculty and staff “to develop student talent from all communities” (Jones 43).

The impact of this mentored student development is particularly noticeable in the USU Honors Program’s current and transfer student admissions. When faculty and staff understand excellence in broad terms and intentionally guide a range of outstanding undergraduates into the honors community, enrollment of first-generation and racial and ethnic minorities in honors improves, nearly matching institutional levels and exceeding the elevated levels of honors first-year holistic admissions. On average, 18% of current or transfer students admitted to the USU Honors Program between 2017–2020 have identified as first-generation students (compared to 21% of all transfer students admitted to USU and 12% of first-year students admitted to honors), and another 11% as URM (compared to 12% of all transfer students admitted to USU and 7% of first-year students admitted to honors). This preliminary work makes clear the need for systematic collaboration to institutionalize inclusive recruiting practices. At land-grant institutions like USU, such issues are further complicated by the fact

that rural students, as Nadworny and Marcus argue, may very well “need at least as much help in navigating the college experience as low-income, first-generation racial and ethnic minorities from inner cities.” Matching the university’s commitment to educational access with a commitment to diversify and open up the possibility of an honors education to more and differently talented students, the honors program seeks to offer as many students as possible an inclusive liberal arts community at the heart of this large land-grant research university.

The program’s flexible four-part honors curriculum intentionally guides and shapes this liberal arts experience for students with different backgrounds and interests, daring them to discover and explore their academic passions and preparing them to succeed in and beyond college. Such guidance is particularly important for those high-achieving students who find themselves, for various reasons and despite impressive abilities, suddenly lost and confused at a large land-grant research institution. Recognizing that “some students have families with the resources to help them overcome the complexities of college, while others don’t” (Nadworny and Marcus), USU has built an adaptable, reflective honors curriculum that connects students early and often with faculty mentors and thus empowers them to take charge of their own learning in productive ways. With clear and gentle guidance, the program introduces incoming honors students to the power of their own minds and the value of creative thinking through a series of honors general education courses, including an Honors Introductory Experience and a team-taught cross-disciplinary Think Tank, both designed by top professors as hands-on interactive learning laboratories. The students discover how—and why—to build close mentoring relationships with faculty and collaborative teams with peers across disciplines, and they begin to recognize what they can contribute to such relationships.

The honors program broadens the valuable cross-disciplinary community that develops in these courses by curating and distributing a weekly campus-wide academic-events newsletter and requiring students to attend and reflect regularly on the events of

their choice. This requirement pushes students gently outside of their academic comfort zones, asking them to engage regularly with their university community, regardless of individual course schedules, parental expectations, or personal backgrounds. As they reflect in writing on the value of taking these minor controlled “risks” with time that they may have previously reserved for more traditional kinds of homework, honors students develop the confidence to design and complete the HIP projects that put academic ideas into practice. This work, in turn, trains and prepares them for the even greater educational responsibility of completing a capstone project that synthesizes their college experiences and acts as a springboard to future goals.

Refiguring “honors contracts” as “Honors in Practice” has allowed the USU Honors Program to emphasize the experiential value of student-driven, faculty-mentored projects over the transactional exchange of knowledge that Badenhausen insightfully critiques. The HIP part of the curriculum aims “to cultivate critical capacity for unique learners” rather than to provide “a standard curriculum for generic knowers” (Stoller 10), treating knowledge not “as an end in itself” but as “the working capital, the indispensable resources, of further inquiry; of finding out, or learning, more things” (Dewey). Because the process of taking thoughtful control of one’s own learning requires gentle but clear guidance, HIP intentionally builds on the earlier stages of the honors curriculum by requiring students to meet and communicate regularly with faculty mentors, who guide them in shaping and documenting concrete extensions of—and exceptions to—their curricular requirements.

Unlike conventional honors contracts, which engage instructors in mentoring an honors student’s extension of non-honors coursework, HIP at USU can be mentored by any faculty member, on any academic topic, in a time frame agreed upon by student and mentor, which often diverges from the standard time frame of an academic term. Every type of HIP involves substantial mentored work beyond the walls of any classroom and documents that work with a concrete final product, such as a paper, poetry chapbook, poster, lab report, podcast, musical composition, or video, as well

as a focused written reflection on what the student has learned. For most kinds of HIP, students submit, with faculty approval, both a preliminary project proposal and final completion documentation, both of which must address four key honors learning outcomes designed to foster, rather than delimit, student growth. All work in HIP must

1. add to the student's overall education and/or future goals,
2. deepen research or creative experience and demand critical thinking about topics in or around the major,
3. broaden experience across disciplines, and
4. engage with the local and/or global communities.

In addition to the student's proposal for meeting these goals and reflective self-assessment upon completion, the honors program requires a primary faculty mentor (selected by the student), a departmental honors advisor (one faculty member per department, appointed by the honors program), and the honors director (*ex officio*) to read and approve HIP at both the proposal and completion stages. The goal of this three-stage review is to assess whether and how each project adds value to the student's honors education within a specific area of study, the discipline as a whole, and across disciplinary boundaries. This combination of reflective student initiative and supportive faculty engagement creates a collaborative, guided opportunity for student growth. Rather than continuing to follow a standard honors course curriculum over four years, honors students at USU are mentored in charting a curricular path for themselves and reflecting upon how and why their coursework might matter to them, both now and in the future.

Honors at USU helps students to shape their own education by not just breaking but also setting a few ground rules. Students earn three honors points upon completion and faculty approval of each HIP, just as they do when they complete and earn credit for an honors course. They may not, of course, earn honors points for the same work twice, just as they cannot, according to USU's academic honesty/integrity code, submit the same work for credit in different

courses. Students may therefore submit for HIP only work that does not meet the requirements of their honors or non-honors courses, although they may, as at other institutions, develop contracts that extend learning beyond the requirements of a course. Since the aim of HIP is to apply knowledge beyond the classroom, however, one exception to the coursework rule is experiential credit from internships, study abroad, and graduate courses completed as an undergraduate, all of which can be framed as HIP with appropriate mentoring and guidance. For similar reasons, HIP can and should prepare students for capstone projects, but students cannot submit the same work to meet both HIP and capstone requirements in the honors curriculum. This forward-looking approach also defines the role of professional development activities in HIP. The honors program recognizes the financial importance of student applications for department, college, honors, or university scholarships or grants, but because major national and international grant, scholarship, and fellowship applications require significantly more self-assessment, mentoring, revision, research, and sometimes interviewing, only such extensive applications can be proposed as HIP. Similarly, while the program supports a broad range of professionalization activities for students, including conference attendance, public presentations, and other professional development work, only those experiences that include sustained mentoring relationships, concrete final products, and substantial experiential work outside the classroom qualify as HIP.

Because students' course schedules do not necessarily dictate the subject matter of HIP, the possibilities are limited only by the imaginations and time constraints of students and mentors, making careful advising and preparation crucial for student success. Honors professional and peer advisors share with each first-year or entering student the HIP handbook and assignments, discussing possible ideas for projects that might explore or follow the student's academic passions in unexpected ways. Similarly, the honors program offers annual faculty training and faculty-student showcases featuring compelling projects, in addition to broad distribution of the HIP handbook, to ensure a shared understanding of honors

curricular goals. These trainings and showcases build a creative, collaborative community of those engaged in HIP, with space for both students and mentors to discover and reflect upon some of the most innovative work of the past several years. Such projects bring the HIP handbook to life: they range from running a community garden with local refugees to researching Shakespeare at the British Library, from submitting a winning Goldwater Scholarship application to tracking cougars in Logan Canyon, from writing a poetry chapbook to researching and building a working medieval trebuchet. These truly exceptional examples of HIP speak to students from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds and with a range of personal and professional goals. Given the freedom to explore, both students and faculty can imagine possibilities and tailor the HIP experience to individual student needs, which include—but can also extend beyond the limits of—more conventional, course-specific honors learning contracts.

The honors program has built upon and extended the sense of collaborative honors community established at HIP showcases by forging several HIP pathways that develop focused communities of honors students and faculty engaged in specific collaborative projects. These structured approaches to HIP include approved graduate “Honors Excel” coursework, an Honors Integrated Research Experience for Undergraduates, Honors Book Labs, the Honors Alumni Mentoring Program, and various student leadership opportunities. Each of these experiences looks to the future in a particular way. The Honors Excel program, for example, allows undergraduates to earn honors points by completing approved graduate-level courses, which quite clearly lead them beyond the usual undergraduate classroom experience. The aim is to empower students to test their undergraduate knowledge by taking the next professional step in a possible academic career. Like other HIP, Honors Excel courses offer students the opportunity to collaborate on cutting-edge research and/or learn about advanced topics in their disciplines with top faculty, graduate students, and honors peers; to complete final products well beyond expectations for undergraduates; and to build mentoring relationships that will continue to develop throughout the student’s

career. Faculty and/or departments are under no obligation to admit honors students to graduate courses; the Honors Excel option simply allows the opportunity when and if a good fit exists between course and student. Since over 50% of graduating USU honors students enroll in graduate or professional programs each year, the aim of Honors Excel is to place students in communities of like-minded peers, graduate students, and faculty so that they can explore and experience graduate school as undergraduates.

Similarly, the program's Honors Integrated Research Experience for Undergraduates (HIREU) creates a collaborative research cohort working in both the lab and the field. The 2019–2020 pilot HIREU engaged a small group of USU honors students across disciplines with honors peers in a year-long intensive study of invasive plants. The experience began with an online training course in the fall, followed by mentored lab research focused on invasive plants in the spring. Before COVID-19 travel restrictions altered plans, the USU honors students were scheduled to participate in an intensive two-week research study abroad trip to a partner institution in Taiwan, where they were to join Taiwanese students in identifying key differences between arid- and tropical-climate invasive plants. That trip has currently been rescheduled for 2021. The HIREU will conclude with a week of cognitive unpacking and reflection upon return. Each part of this experience earns a proportionate number of honors points to mark student progress through the program. The small cohort and structure of this year-long HIP prepare students to develop their own independent research projects in the future.

Honors Book Labs take a very different approach to putting honors into practice by engaging small groups of students and faculty from different disciplines in a four-week reading and discussion experience. The idea is simple: faculty from a range of academic areas propose books, in or outside their areas of expertise, to discuss with honors students. The honors program creates a schedule of Book Labs each term, organizes sign-ups and waitlists with a limit of five students per lab, buys all books for students and faculty, and evaluates student reflections upon completion. Labs meet

four times for an hour per week at the beginning of each term, and students may enroll in one Book Lab per semester as long as they remain in good standing and are making progress toward honors graduation. Book Labs are non-credit-bearing and ungraded, and they follow no set syllabus: faculty can lead them in teams or alone, with guest speakers or field trips, informally or with the structure of their choice. Students are responsible for reading the books, contributing to discussions in the four required meetings, and submitting a detailed reflection within two weeks of completing the lab discussion. These 600-word reflections, which are evaluated by the honors director and earn one honors point upon approval, ask students to consider the nature of this short-term HIP in relation to honors learning outcomes by

1. articulating one *new idea or set of ideas* that they discovered through reading and discussion,
2. giving an example of how the reading and discussion led them to *think critically* about a particular issue or problem,
3. describing the value of discussing this issue or problem *across disciplines* with fellow students and professor(s), and
4. discussing how the Book Lab experience might lead them to *engage with the community or world* in a new way.

Books have ranged from *Alice in Wonderland* to *Massacre at Bear River*, from *Homosexuality and Civilization* to *Gödel, Escher, Bach*. In each case, students discuss ideas openly with peers and professors whom they often do not know. The immense popularity of these labs among both faculty and students suggests a very real desire to engage with and apply ideas beyond the limits of the academic curriculum. The five-student format is particularly adaptable to virtual formats, and the honors program ran a total of 13 Zoom Book Labs designed to engage current students over the summer of 2020.

Honors extends this opportunity for engagement to alumni as well with our Alumni Mentoring Program (AMP), which fosters meaningful relationships between current honors students and alumni with shared professional and/or academic interests. Honors

recruits alumni as potential mentors in the summer and then invites students to sign an agreement and select their own mentors in the fall. Guided by a year-long monthly curriculum, students and mentors communicate by email, phone, video, or even in-person conferences. Students complete assignments and work with their mentors to master four key areas:

1. Professionalism,
2. Applications (job, internship, scholarships),
3. Networking and Professional Development, and
4. Gratitude and Appreciation.

Students must complete all AMP requirements, including thanking their mentors, to remain in good standing with the honors program. Upon submission of a final portfolio including select mentor correspondence, documentation from each of the program's four parts, and a 600-word reflection on the mentoring experience, students earn three honors points, as they would for other kinds of HIP. Their reflections articulate, once again, how this particular HIP met honors learning outcomes by

1. adding to the student's *overall education* and/or *future goals*,
2. demanding *critical thinking* about professional topics connected with the major(s)/minor(s),
3. broadening the student's *experience across disciplines*, and
4. engaging the student in *local or global communities*.

Paired with mentors whose professional experience includes involvement in many top graduate programs and work for the BBC, Google, and the White House, our students develop lasting relationships that situate their current academic work within broader professional contexts and practices.

Much as our alumni help to shape the professional futures of current honors students, the students themselves can help shape the honors experience for their peers through work on the Honors Student Advisory Board (HSAB), composed of one honors student

representative from each of USU's eight colleges. Board members meet monthly, represent honors as ambassadors at recruiting events, participate in honors programming, serve with faculty on cross-disciplinary committees that review incoming student applications, and work alongside the Honors Faculty Advisory Board in evaluating all honors course proposals. Students apply for these appointed positions and serve a (repeatable) term of one academic year. This structured HIP not only engages students in building the honors program on campus but also prepares them to volunteer for our alumni mentoring program after graduation. Upon completion of this year-long leadership experience, students earn three points by submitting a final portfolio that includes a log of programming participation and meeting attendance, a summary of recruiting and ambassadorial work for the honors program, and a 600-word reflection. Tied once again to honors learning outcomes, these reflections describe how HSAB work has

1. added to the student's *overall education* and/or future goals through the development of leadership and ambassadorial skills,
2. demanded *critical thinking* about the relationship between the student's major college and other colleges and programs on campus,
3. broadened the student's experience across disciplines by building *relationships* among students on the board and between students and honors program staff, and
4. engaged the student in the *campus* and *broader communities* through the ambassadorial role.

Once again, this honors leadership experience puts knowledge about both one's discipline and the university community into practice and thus gives HSAB members control of their own educational development, even as they help other honors students to develop and grow.

By building community, teaching self-awareness, and systematically assessing learning outcomes, these HIP pathways train

independent learners and ensure equity and access for all honors students, regardless of previous academic or extracurricular experience. Part of the mission of Honors in Practice is to teach young adults to define and articulate the value of their education to anyone who may not understand. By helping them to write their personal success stories in small cohorts and with careful mentoring, the honors program builds confident students and an inclusive curriculum with real-world value. In pursuit of these goals, the program has more recently designed three additional cohort-based approaches to HIP: the Honors Leadership Academy, the Honors Dare to Know Global Engagement Experience, and the Honors Sustainability Lab. As a pathway not only to other HIP but also to the Honors Student Advisory Board, the leadership academy creates an apprenticeship model that prepares first- and second-year students for leadership roles in their final college years. Still in the planning stages, the global engagement HIP experience will similarly focus on early-career honors students: this year-long cohort study of scientific and humanistic knowledge and discovery for first-year first-generation students will culminate in an Enlightenment-focused European study abroad experience. The Honors Sustainability Lab, also in development, will be run by faculty members who involve students in community-engaged sustainability work by building teams and forging collaborative relationships with specific community partners. Through cohort work, these new pathways guide students in developing the confidence and skill to work independently on the projects of their choice.

Students and faculty can engage imaginatively with more independent self-structured HIP only when they fully understand the possibilities, purpose, and requirements of this experiential part of the honors curriculum. In addition to the honors HIP structures described above, the program has thus built a series of self-paced, online HIP modules designed to guide students as they complete their first honors semester and prepare to engage in HIP. This online guidance is modeled on an existing, highly successful honors capstone preparation course, which was developed in 2017. The one-credit pass-fail pre-capstone course meets in person twice per

term to establish the incoming capstone cohort; the online portion of this hybrid course prepares juniors to submit their own capstone proposals by first asking them to read and reflect upon strong honors capstone proposals, projects, and public presentations in their disciplines. In the HIP training, which runs alongside a parallel series of faculty training tutorials, students can similarly examine past examples of HIP work as they prepare to design their own projects. The combination of HIP showcases, pathways, and these online tutorials extends the USU's Honors Program's "Dare to Know" to more students and faculty and makes the HIP part of the curriculum more productive and meaningful for all.

The ultimate goal here is to expand the boundaries of the classroom and the honors community by developing, documenting, and showcasing the strengths of all stakeholders in HIP work. The honors program demonstrates the impact of this work to students, faculty, and institutional administrators with specific forms of documentation that lead directly and clearly to professional development. For students, HIP proposals and completion documentation build a growing portfolio of extracurricular achievements even as they cultivate the reflective skill necessary to describe the personal and professional value of that work. (Appendices B and C include sample forms.) As students collaborate with faculty and the honors program to identify projects and articulate the value of research or creative work, they learn through HIP to advocate for themselves in the present and future. To support the faculty who mentor students through this developmental process, the honors program has worked with institutional leadership to embed the value of HIP and capstone mentoring, honors teaching, and honors service in faculty code, job descriptions, and promotion documentation. (Appendix A includes a template.) By foregrounding and institutionalizing the professional importance of this honors work, the program has raised its profile on campus; developed crucial partnerships with colleges, departments, and other units; and incentivized faculty to engage in work that they already find personally rewarding and professionally enriching. The idea of a personalized, yet standardized honors *curriculum vitae*, recognized and rewarded by the institution's central

promotion and tenure committee, President, and Board of Trustees, has been a particularly important way to document the quality and quantity of honors faculty mentoring and service work. Annual public awards, which include honoraria for outstanding teaching (nominated and chosen by honors students), mentoring (for faculty supervising award-winning capstone work), and service (chosen as a Friend of Honors), foreground the program's appreciation of all forms of faculty engagement. The Utah State University Honors Program leads the campus in creative, collaborative partnerships supporting faculty equity, and the director has collaborated with other programs and departments interested in developing similar faculty reward systems. Such imaginative high-impact leadership has made the USU Honors Program a sought-after and valued partner for institutional collaboration.

### **BEYOND UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY: ARE HONORS CONTRACTS FOR YOU?**

Honors in Practice is fundamental to the land-grant mission of USU because this work applies academic learning, connects students with outstanding teachers and mentors, and develops the "Citizen Scholars" whom USU's general education curriculum promises to train. A fundamental premise of HIP is that the best honors contracts intentionally prepare students for a meaningful future by engaging them firmly and thoughtfully in the present. Whether this work focuses on the near future (exploration of academic interests, research, creative apprenticeships, community or global engagement, or capstone preparation) or a long-term plan (national fellowship applications, internships, professional development, research, or graduate coursework), the structured requirements of HIP add depth and meaning to projects and activities that typically appeal to outstanding students. More than many other college graduates, students who bring their intellectual passions to life, engage collaboratively with their mentors, and reflect upon the value of their own applied-learning projects understand the value of their undergraduate experience and can articulate

that value to others. Students and faculty who perceive Honors in Practice as a series of worthwhile milestones on the path toward short- and long-term goals will reliably design experiences that add to and deepen an honors education, both at the institution and beyond.

All of the writers in this volume have called for a proactive approach to putting honors into practice. Even Badenhausen's objections rest upon the need for such thoughtful action: the institutional leadership role of honors programs and colleges depends upon their ability to identify and share best practices in meeting and assessing learning outcomes, fostering community, and modeling equity. While each chapter's ideas may or may not apply directly to a particular curriculum, readers have already heeded the volume's call to action by attending to the conversation thoughtfully started by its contributors. The overarching goal of the collection is to engage the reader's imagination with a range of flexible, experiential, and practical blueprints for building honors contracts. When students put honors into practice, whether within or without the bounds of established coursework, they choose their own adventures and map their own undergraduate paths. More broadly, the outward-looking, engaged approach to contract learning described in each of this volume's chapters transforms students into lifelong learners equipped to shape their own personal and professional futures. By challenging students, faculty, staff, and administrators to follow their curiosity and to lead others toward collaborative discovery, the best honors contracts take up and deliver on Horace's dictum: *Sapere aude*—or dare to know. That challenge is central to honors education, regardless of how honors educators decide to structure their curricula.

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## APPENDIX A

## Utah State University Honors Program Faculty Honors *Curriculum Vitae*

USU faculty may request a personalized *curriculum vitae* of honors work at any time. The honors program verifies the faculty member's relevant teaching/mentoring, service, and awards and inserts terms and descriptions of that work to personalize the general template below. USU's Provost and Faculty Senate have approved this format and recognize this documentation as part of promotion and tenure dossiers. The italicized, standardized language below explains the nature and value of each kind of work. Only relevant categories appear on each *curriculum vitae*, and the non-italicized text is personalized to reflect each faculty member's engagement with the honors program.

### **Teaching**

*The Utah State University Policy Manual identifies "honors or other independent study work" as documentation of teaching performance for core faculty seeking tenure and/or promotion (USU Policy 405.2.2), professional career and technical education faculty seeking tenure and/or promotion (USU Policy 405.5.2), and term faculty seeking promotion (USU Policy 405.10.1). The University Honors Program depends upon faculty work with honors students and therefore documents this work for the purposes of tenure and/or promotion, upon request.*

**Honors Course Teacher** *(The University Honors Program requires all students to complete three honors core courses, all of which feature a high level of faculty-student interaction. These courses can include honors general education classes, special honors sections of departmental classes, or honors special topics courses.)*

- **Year (Term):** Course name, general education designation, and number of credits
- [continue . . . list most recent courses taught first]

*DUTIES OF HONORS COURSE TEACHER: 1) Serve as the instructor for an honors course (typically three credits); 2) Ensure that the course teaches and integrates the four key skills required by the honors program: critical thinking, independent research, interdisciplinary learning, and civic engagement; 3) Meet regularly and individually with students outside of class, fostering both mastery of course material and broader academic success; 4) Provide prompt, detailed feedback on all assignments; 5) Support the program by attending honors events, advocating for the program, and recruiting talented honors students.*

**Honors Capstone Mentor** (*Honors capstones are major student research or creative projects that require at least one term of independent study with a faculty mentor.*)

- **Year (Term):** Student's name, "Title of Capstone Project"
- [continue . . . list most recent graduates first]

*DUTIES OF HONORS CAPSTONE MENTOR: 1) Serve as the instructor for a three-credit independent-study capstone course; 2) Mentor students in writing the capstone proposal; 3) Meet regularly with students and committees; 4) Train students in research best practices; 5) Provide prompt, detailed feedback on drafts; 6) Help students find venues for public presentation; 7) Work with students to ensure polished final products.*

**Honors Capstone Committee Member** (*Honors capstones are major student research or creative projects that require at least one committee member, in addition to the Honors Capstone Mentor.*)

- **Year (Term):** Student's name, "Title of Capstone Project"
- [continue . . . list most recent graduates first]

*DUTIES OF HONORS CAPSTONE COMMITTEE MEMBER: 1) Comment on and approve capstone proposals; 2) Meet regularly with students and mentors; 3) Provide prompt, detailed feedback when requested; 4) Work with students and mentors to ensure polished final products.*

**Honors Contract Mentor** (*Honors contracts are independent student projects mentored by a faculty member. Instruction of an approved honors student in an Honors Excel graduate course qualifies as mentorship of one Honors contract. Each project applies academic knowledge in practical ways and requires at least 20 hours of student work outside the classroom.*)

- **Year (Term):** Student's name, "Title of Contract"
- [continue . . . list most recent graduates first]

*DUTIES OF HONORS CONTRACT MENTOR: 1) Mentor students in writing contract proposal (design content for Honors Excel course); 2) Guide students in professional completion of contracted work; 3) Meet students regularly throughout the contract; 4) Provide prompt, detailed feedback on student work and/or final products.*

**Supervised Teaching Activity/Honors UTF** (*Honors hires Undergraduate Teaching Fellows (UTFs) for our Introductory Experience and Think Tank General Education courses. USU's stated expectation for UTFs is that they "assist faculty mentors with day-to-day classroom management and teaching tasks and help their*

*fellow students by providing assistance with their coursework. UTFs should meet with their faculty mentors . . . , [and] the average time commitment to work as a UTF is 15 hours per week. Meeting regularly with and mentoring these UTFs in pedagogical work is required of all honors instructors.)*

- **Year (Term):** Student's name, Course Number "Course Title" (General Education Designation), Award (if student earned award recognition for outstanding work as a UTF)

**Honors Book Lab Mentor** *(Each term, the University Honors Program offers students the opportunity to join four-week, five-person, cross-disciplinary reading groups led by volunteer faculty who have chosen the book and lead discussions.)*

- **Year (Term):** Book Title by Author Name

*DUTIES OF HONORS BOOK LAB MENTOR: 1) Propose book and write description for student recruiting; 2) Coordinate scheduling with University Honors Program staff; 3) Meet with students four times, one hour per week in weeks two through five of the term; 4) Lead cross-disciplinary discussions for honors students, who reflect upon that experience for honors points.*

### **Service**

*The Utah State University Policy Manual identifies "membership in, and leadership of, departmental, college and university committees and organizations" as evidence of service for core faculty seeking tenure and/or promotion (USU Policy 405.2.2), professional career and technical education faculty seeking tenure and/or promotion (USU Policy 405.5.2), and term faculty seeking promotion (USU Policy 405.10.1). The University Honors Program depends upon faculty engagement at the department, college, and university levels and therefore documents this work for the purposes of tenure and/or promotion, upon request.*

**Honors Faculty Advisory Board** *(The University Honors Program appoints one faculty representative from each college (including Libraries) to offer a faculty perspective on programmatic issues. Board membership is reviewed and updated annually, and the Associate Vice President for Research (undergraduate) serves ex officio on the board.)*

- **Year:** College of XXX Representative

*DUTIES OF HONORS FACULTY ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS: 1) Represent college interests at board meetings and provide college-specific feedback on program initiatives and ideas; 2) Participate in (and recruit other college faculty for) the University Honors Program admissions process by evaluating and discussing incoming and*

current/transfer applications; 3) Advocate for the University Honors Program within the college and communicate with faculty and administrators about the value and goals of the program; 4) Participate in University Honors Program events and create a sense of honors community at the college level.

**Departmental Honors Advisor** (*The University Honors Program appoints one faculty representative from each department to serve as point of contact for all honors students and faculty in the department. Service in this role is reviewed and updated annually.*)

- **Year:** Department of XX, College of YY

*DUTIES OF DEPARTMENTAL HONORS ADVISORS: 1) Provide department-specific input about the University Honors Program; 2) Communicate regularly with the University Honors Program Executive Director to ensure accurate advising of students; 3) Serve as a committee member on departmental capstone projects (see teaching above); 4) Review and offer feedback on students' contract proposals within the department; 5) Advise department students about capstones, contracts, and other opportunities in the field; 6) Advocate for the University Honors Program within the department and communicate with faculty and administrators about the value and goals of the program; 7) Participate in University Honors Program events and create a sense of honors community at the department level.*

**Honors Committee Membership** (*The University Honors Program invites faculty to serve on a variety of committees for the purposes of scholarship review, holistic admissions review, etc.*)

- **Year:** Honors XXX Committee Member

*DUTIES OF HONORS COMMITTEE MEMBERS: 1) Attend committee meetings, as scheduled; 2) Use provided rubrics and spreadsheets to review, as necessary; 3) Contribute faculty and disciplinary perspectives to group conversations; 4) Respond to University Honors Program staff in a timely and efficient manner.*

### **Awards and Honors**

*The Utah State University Policy Manual (USU Policy 405) identifies the teaching and service work outlined below as performance documentation for faculty seeking tenure and/or promotion. The University Honors Program depends upon and recognizes exceptional faculty engagement in these areas with select annual awards, including the Friend of Honors, Honors Outstanding Professor (presents Honors Last Lecture), and Outstanding Capstone Mentor. Brief descriptions of awards follow each award given.*

- **Year:** Friend of Honors Award (*Each year, the University Honors Program recognizes a faculty member whose service as a teacher, mentor, and community member demonstrates an exceptional commitment to honors education. Award winners model and mentor critical thinking, independent research, interdisciplinary learning, and community engagement for students, and are thus crucial to the mission of the University Honors Program.*)
- **Year:** Honors Outstanding Professor (*Each year, honors students nominate faculty, and a committee of honors students interviews nominees and selects an Honors Outstanding Professor, who delivers the Honors Last Lecture in the fall. These faculty have made an impact on students, both in and outside the classroom, through their teaching and mentorship.*)
- **Year:** Outstanding Capstone Mentor (*Each year, the University Honors Program recognizes two outstanding student capstones, one in STEM and one in other fields. This award commends mentors of these exceptional projects for their active mentorship and guidance of this remarkable work.*)

## APPENDIX B

## Utah State University Honors Program Honors Mentoring Agreement Proposal

An Honors Mentoring Agreement (“contract”) is a formal agreement between a student, a mentor, the DHA, and Honors to complete an Honors in Practice experience. Each agreement proposes—and then documents the student’s completion of—an academic or professional project that extends learning beyond regular coursework. Students earn **3 honors points** for every successfully proposed, completed, and approved project, and these projects require a minimum of 20 hours of work outside the classroom. The *Honors in Practice Handbook* and the University Honors Program (UHP) Canvas course (for students) include detailed descriptions of the types and uses of Honors Mentoring Agreements (HMA), as well as student and faculty responsibilities and step-by-step instructions.

Student’s Name \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_ ID # \_\_\_\_\_

Expected Graduation Semester/Year \_\_\_\_\_

Major(s) and/or Minor(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Student’s Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
(*verifies understanding of contract requirements*)

Contract Start/End Dates or Term \_\_\_\_\_

Project Title (or course dept., #, and title) \_\_\_\_\_

Is this an internship  or study abroad ?

ESTIMATED TOTAL WORK HOURS \_\_\_\_\_

Mentor’s Name (print) \_\_\_\_\_

Mentor’s Email \_\_\_\_\_

Mentor’s Department \_\_\_\_\_

Departmental Honors Advisor’s Name (print) \_\_\_\_\_

Mentor’s Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
(*Mentor and DHA signatures verify reading and approval of proposal.*)

Dept. Faculty Honors Advisor’s Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
(*or attach email indicating approval*)

### REQUIREMENTS

Honors Mentoring Agreements (HMA) are for **honors students only** and are valid only if proposed and approved before the project begins and documented and approved upon completion.

- At the beginning of the project, the mentor and DHA indicate project approval by reading the HMA Proposal and signing this form. Honors approval then follows upon submission and review of the signed proposal in the UHP Canvas course.
- All HMAs must result in a concrete final product (poster, report, paper, PowerPoint, photo documentation, work log, etc.) and a 500–600 word reflective essay about this experience of Honors in Practice (HIP).
- Students must complete the HMA by the stated deadline or communicate changes in timeline with the mentor, DHA, and Honors.
- HMAs need not be connected to a course, but if they are, only **upper-division courses** are acceptable. The work for these agreements is not graded and does not affect the course grade, but students must pass any class associated with an HMA.

## WORK

HMAs enrich a student's academic experience beyond normal coursework. Each HMA demands a minimum of **20 hours** of work beyond normal coursework. Students may complete more than one HMA for an extensive project, but each part of that longer project must be proposed, approved, and completed as its own agreement. The student and mentor must meet (outside of class) **at least twice per month (minimum six times per semester)** to discuss the project. Students report meeting dates upon completion.

## PROPOSAL

Please indicate if HMA fulfills Honors Excel  **or** Community-Engaged Scholar  **or** Global Engagement Scholar  **or** Undergraduate Research  requirements—if so, explain how the agreement meets those requirements in #1.

The proposal includes two parts: 1) a **brief project overview**, including key **goals**, proposed **work** and **timeline**, and description of **final product** (beyond required reflection); and 2) a **detailed rationale** for how the HMA meets honors learning outcomes by adding to student's **overall education** or **future goals**, deepening **research** experience in major or demanding **critical thinking** about major topics, broadening **experience across disciplines**, and engaging student in the **local or global community**.

***APPROVAL:** Students must upload complete proposals with signed forms in the UHP Canvas course; Honors approves or denies all HMAs and awards points only after successful contract completion and upload of all completion documentation.*

## APPENDIX C

## Utah State University Honors Program Honors Mentoring Agreement Completion

Students earn 3 honors points upon upload and final Honors approval of this completed form (with all signatures), the final product of the Honors Mentoring Agreement (“contract”), and a 500–600 word reflection in the University Honors Program (UHP) Canvas course. Students should address each point below and share all documentation with the mentor and Departmental Faculty Honors Advisor, who sign this form to indicate approval of the project and documentation.

Student’s Name \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_ ID # \_\_\_\_\_

Expected Graduation Semester/Year \_\_\_\_\_

Major(s) and/or Minor(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Student’s Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*(Student’s signature verifies accuracy of all information included on this form.)*

Project Title (or course dept., #, and title) \_\_\_\_\_

Is this an internship  or study abroad ?

Mentoring Agreement Start/End Dates or Term \_\_\_\_\_

Mentor’s Name \_\_\_\_\_

Mentor’s Department \_\_\_\_\_

Departmental Honors Advisor Name \_\_\_\_\_

Mentor’s Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dept. Faculty Honors Advisor’s Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*(or PRINT NAME ABOVE and attach email indicating approval)*

***Faculty signatures indicate that the Honors Mentoring Agreement (HMA) has been completed to the mentor’s and DHA’s satisfaction and that they have seen the final product and reflection.***

Was this an Honors Excel HMA?  Yes  No If “yes,” please skip to #3 below.

1. List the dates of student-mentor meetings outside of class (minimum **six** times; mentor must approve by signing above):

\_\_\_\_\_

For study abroad or internships, check here to verify daily mentor meetings. □

2. How many hours did the HMA take to complete? \_\_\_\_\_ hours

*\*NOTE: 20-hour minimum; HMAs may be extended by working with honors staff.*

3. Students must **attach a 500–600 word reflection**, outlining how the HMA put academic **knowledge into practice** (the aim of all Honors Mentoring Agreements) and created a meaningful **relationship with the mentor**. The reflection must specifically address how the **HMA work met honors learning outcomes** by 1) adding to the student's overall education and/or future goals, 2) deepening research experience within the major and/or demanding critical thinking about topics in the major, 3) broadening the student's experience across disciplines, and 4) engaging the student in the local or global community.

*\* NOTE: For Honors Excel graduate courses, students should indicate how the class and assignments have deepened understanding of graduate-level work and helped to shape future plans (covering topics above).*

4. All HMAs require solid evidence of the work completed over the course of the project. Students should briefly summarize below the content, format, and personal value of that final product, and then attach that final product to this form (for faculty endorsement) and upload to Canvas (for final Honors approval).

**APPROVAL:** *Students must upload all completion documentation (with signatures) in the Honors Canvas course; Honors awards points upon approval of that documentation.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## ABOUT THE NCHC MONOGRAPH SERIES

The Publications Board of the National Collegiate Honors Council typically publishes two to three monographs a year. The subject matter and style range widely: from handbooks on nuts-and-bolts practices and discussions of honors pedagogy to anthologies on diverse topics addressing honors education and issues relevant to higher education.

The Publications Board encourages people with expertise interested in writing such a monograph to submit a prospectus. Prospective authors or editors of an anthology should submit a proposal discussing the purpose or scope of the manuscript; a prospectus that includes a chapter by chapter summary; a brief writing sample, preferably a draft of the introduction or an early chapter; and a *curriculum vitae*. All monograph proposals will be reviewed by the NCHC Publications Board.

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## NCHC Monographs & Journals

***Assessing and Evaluating Honors Programs and Honors Colleges: A Practical Handbook*** by Rosalie Otero and Robert Spurrier (2005, 98pp). This monograph includes an overview of assessment and evaluation practices and strategies. It explores the process for conducting self-studies and discusses the differences between using consultants and external reviewers. It provides a guide to conducting external reviews along with information about how to become an NCHC-Recommended Site Visitor. A dozen appendices provide examples of “best practices.”

***Beginning in Honors: A Handbook*** by Samuel Schuman (Fourth Edition, 2006, 80pp). Advice on starting a new honors program. Covers budgets, recruiting students and faculty, physical plant, administrative concerns, curriculum design, and descriptions of some model programs.

***Breaking Barriers in Teaching and Learning*** edited by James Ford and John Zubizarreta (2018, 252pp). This volume—with wider application beyond honors classrooms and programs—offers various ideas, practical approaches, experiences, and adaptable models for breaking traditional barriers in teaching and learning. The contributions inspire us to retool the ways in which we teach and create curriculum and to rethink our assumptions about learning. Honors education centers on the power of excellence in teaching and learning. Breaking free of barriers allows us to use new skills, adjusted ways of thinking, and new freedoms to innovate as starting points for enhancing the learning of all students.

***Building Honors Contracts: Insights and Oversights*** edited by Kristine A. Miller (2020, 322pp). Exploring the history, pedagogy, and administrative structures of mentored student learning, this collection of essays engages in creative curricular design. The book offers a blueprint for building collaborative experiential honors contracts that transcend the transactional.

***The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education: New Research Evidence*** edited by Andrew J. Cognard-Black, Jerry Herron, and Patricia J. Smith (2019, 292pp). Using a variety of different methods and exploring a variety of different outcomes across a diversity of institutions and institution types, the contributors to this volume offer research that substantiates in measurable ways the claims by honors educators of value added for honors programming.

***Fundraising for Honor\$: A Handbook*** by Larry R. Andrews (2009, 160pp). Offers information and advice on raising money for honors, beginning with easy first steps and progressing to more sophisticated and ambitious fundraising activities.

***A Handbook for Honors Administrators*** by Ada Long (1995, 117pp). Everything an honors administrator needs to know, including a description of some models of honors administration.

***A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges*** by Theresa A. James (2006, 136pp). A useful handbook for two-year schools contemplating beginning or redesigning their honors program and for four-year schools doing likewise or wanting to increase awareness about two-year programs and articulation agreements. Contains extensive appendices about honors contracts and a comprehensive bibliography on honors education.

## NCHC Monographs & Journals

***The Honors College Phenomenon*** edited by Peter C. Sederberg (2008, 172pp). This monograph examines the growth of honors colleges since 1990: historical and descriptive characterizations of the trend, alternative models that include determining whether becoming a college is appropriate, and stories of creation and recreation. Leaders whose institutions are contemplating or taking this step as well as those directing established colleges should find these essays valuable.

***Honors Composition: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Practices*** by Annmarie Guzy (2003, 182pp). Parallel historical developments in honors and composition studies; contemporary honors writing projects ranging from admission essays to theses as reported by over 300 NCHC members.

***Honors Programs at Smaller Colleges*** by Samuel Schuman (Third Edition, 2011, 80pp). Practical and comprehensive advice on creating and managing honors programs with particular emphasis on colleges with fewer than 4,000 students.

***The Honors Thesis: A Handbook for Honors Directors, Deans, and Faculty Advisors*** by Mark Anderson, Karen Lyons, and Norman Weiner (2014, 176pp). To all those who design, administer, and implement an honors thesis program, this handbook offers a range of options, models, best practices, and philosophies that illustrate how to evaluate an honors thesis program, solve pressing problems, select effective requirements and procedures, or introduce a new honors thesis program.

***Housing Honors*** edited by Linda Frost, Lisa W. Kay, and Rachael Poe (2015, 352pp). This collection of essays addresses the issues of where honors lives and how honors space influences educators and students. This volume includes the results of a survey of over 400 institutions; essays on the acquisition, construction, renovation, development, and even the loss of honors space; a forum offering a range of perspectives on residential space for honors students; and a section featuring student perspectives.

***If Honors Students Were People: Holistic Honors Education*** by Samuel Schuman (2013, 256pp). What if honors students were people? What if they were not disembodied intellects but whole persons with physical bodies and questing spirits? Of course . . . they are. This monograph examines the spiritual yearnings of college students and the relationship between exercise and learning.

***Inspiring Exemplary Teaching and Learning: Perspectives on Teaching Academically Talented College Students*** edited by Larry Clark and John Zubizarreta (2008, 216pp). This rich collection of essays offers valuable insights into innovative teaching and significant learning in the context of academically challenging classrooms and programs. The volume provides theoretical, descriptive, and practical resources, including models of effective instructional practices, examples of successful courses designed for enhanced learning, and a list of online links to teaching and learning centers and educational databases worldwide.

## NCHC Monographs & Journals

***Internationalizing Honors*** edited by Kim Klein and Mary Kay Mulvaney (2020, 468pp.). This monograph takes a holistic approach to internationalization, highlighting how honors has gone beyond providing short-term international experiences for students and made global issues and experiences central features of curricular and co-curricular programming. The chapters present case studies that serve as models for honors programs and colleges seeking to initiate and further their internationalization efforts.

***Occupy Honors Education*** edited by Lisa L. Coleman, Jonathan D. Kotinek, and Alan Y. Oda (2017, 394pp). This collection of essays issues a call to honors to make diversity, equity, and inclusive excellence its central mission and ongoing state of mind. Echoing the AAC&U declaration “without inclusion there is no true excellence,” the authors discuss transformational diversity, why it is essential, and how to achieve it.

***The Other Culture: Science and Mathematics Education in Honors*** edited by Ellen B. Buckner and Keith Garbutt (2012, 296pp). A collection of essays about teaching science and math in an honors context: topics include science in society, strategies for science and non-science majors, the threat of pseudoscience, chemistry, interdisciplinary science, scientific literacy, philosophy of science, thesis development, calculus, and statistics.

***Partners in the Parks: Field Guide to an Experiential Program in the National Parks*** by Joan Digby with reflective essays on theory and practice by student and faculty participants and National Park Service personnel (First Edition, 2010, 272pp). This monograph explores an experiential-learning program that fosters immersion in and stewardship of the national parks. The topics include program designs, group dynamics, philosophical and political issues, photography, wilderness exploration, and assessment.

***Partners in the Parks: Field Guide to an Experiential Program in the National Parks*** edited by Heather Thiessen-Reily and Joan Digby (Second Edition, 2016, 268pp). This collection of recent photographs and essays by students, faculty, and National Park Service rangers reflects upon PITP experiential-learning projects in new NPS locations, offers significant refinements in programming and curriculum for revisited projects, and provides strategies and tools for assessing PITP adventures.

***Place as Text: Approaches to Active Learning*** edited by Bernice Braid and Ada Long (Second Edition, 2010, 128pp). Updated theory, information, and advice on experiential pedagogies developed within NCHC during the past 35 years, including Honors Semesters and City as Text™, along with suggested adaptations to multiple educational contexts.

***Preparing Tomorrow's Global Leaders: Honors International Education*** edited by Mary Kay Mulvaney and Kim Klein (2013, 400pp). A valuable resource for initiating or expanding honors study abroad programs, these essays examine theoretical issues, curricular and faculty development, assessment, funding, and security. The monograph also provides models of successful programs that incorporate high-impact educational practices, including City as Text™ pedagogy, service learning, and undergraduate research.

## NCHC Monographs & Journals

***Setting the Table for Diversity*** edited by Lisa L. Coleman and Jonathan D. Kotinek (2010, 288pp). This collection of essays provides definitions of diversity in honors, explores the challenges and opportunities diversity brings to honors education, and depicts the transformative nature of diversity when coupled with equity and inclusion. These essays discuss African American, Latinx, international, and first-generation students as well as students with disabilities. Other issues include experiential and service learning, the politics of diversity, and the psychological resistance to it. Appendices relating to NCHC member institutions contain diversity statements and a structural diversity survey.

***Shatter the Glassy Stare: Implementing Experiential Learning in Higher Education*** edited by Peter A. Machonis (2008, 160pp). A companion piece to *Place as Text*, focusing on recent, innovative applications of City as Text™ teaching strategies. Chapters on campus as text, local neighborhoods, study abroad, science courses, writing exercises, and philosophical considerations, with practical materials for instituting this pedagogy.

***Teaching and Learning in Honors*** edited by Cheryl L. Fuiks and Larry Clark (2000, 128pp). Presents a variety of perspectives on teaching and learning useful to anyone developing new or renovating established honors curricula.

***Writing on Your Feet: Reflective Practices in City as Text™*** edited by Ada Long (2014, 160pp). A sequel to the NCHC monographs *Place as Text: Approaches to Active Learning* and *Shatter the Glassy Stare: Implementing Experiential Learning in Higher Education*, this volume explores the role of reflective writing in the process of active learning while also paying homage to the City as Text™ approach to experiential education that has been pioneered by Bernice Braid and sponsored by NCHC during the past four decades.

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***Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC)*** is a semi-annual periodical featuring scholarly articles on honors education. Articles may include analyses of trends in teaching methodology, articles on interdisciplinary efforts, discussions of problems common to honors programs, items on the national higher education agenda, and presentations of emergent issues relevant to honors education.

***Honors in Practice (HIP)*** is an annual journal of applied research publishing articles about innovative honors practices and integrative, interdisciplinary, and pedagogical issues of interest to honors educators.

***UReCA: The NCHC Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity*** is a web-based, peer-reviewed journal edited by honors students that fosters the exchange of intellectual and creative work among undergraduates, providing a platform where all students can engage with and contribute to the advancement of their individual fields. To learn more, visit <<http://www.nchc-ureca.com>>.

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“The overarching goal of the collection is to engage the reader’s imagination with a range of flexible, experiential, and practical blueprints for building honors contracts. When students put honors into practice, whether within or without the bounds of established coursework, they choose their own adventures and map their own undergraduate paths. More broadly, the outward-looking, engaged approach to contract learning described in each of this volume’s chapters transforms students into lifelong learners equipped to shape their own personal and professional futures. By challenging students, faculty, staff, and administrators to follow their curiosity and to lead others toward collaborative discovery, the best honors contracts take up and deliver on Horace’s dictum: *Sapere aude*—or dare to know. That challenge is central to honors education, regardless of how honors educators decide to structure their curricula.”

—*Kristine A. Miller*