



Faculty Guide to Creating and Teaching Honors Courses

Our mission in the Honors Program at Arkansas State University-Beebe is to provide a vibrant educational environment for innovative teaching and learning within an interdisciplinary curriculum sparked by creative, critical inquiry and respect for a multiplicity of thoughts, experiences, and identities. Educational environment is both stimulating and rewarding to teach.

Why Teach an Honors Course?

Teaching an honors course is not required of faculty but it adds to a faculty member's teaching accomplishments (as suggested below) and is properly considered service to the college as a whole. Honors courses are intended to be more complex, not necessarily more difficult. Faculty who teach Honors courses are highly encouraged to explore their own pedagogical boundaries. We know that teaching honors can enhance not your life as faculty but also the lives of all students with whom you work – not just those interacted in Honors courses. We believe the Honors Program serves as a nurturing ground for pedagogical innovation and exploration that transforms the quality of educational experiences across the college.

1. **Intellectual and creative challenges.** Teaching honors courses provides great opportunity for faculty to “think outside the box”. Beyond their regular teaching duties, honors instructors are challenged to explore outside of the routine academic demands. Honors students are enthusiastic and ready to explore new ideas and approaches that faculty may have considered, but have not had a chance to implement given practical restrictions of regular class size or academic comprehension level.
2. **Interactive classroom environment.** Smaller, semi seminar-style classes of motivated, well-prepared, and responsible students teaching environment. It is gratifying to develop collaboration between teacher and student to explore new ideas through fresh perspectives together.
3. **Quality, not quantity.** Attempting to meet the rigorous academic demands of honors course does not mean piling up more assignments. Rather, Honors courses should provide students different types of assignment, rather than more assignments. This may imply holding our students to a higher standard for quality of critical thinking process (e.g. substituting more challenging problems, readings, projects or activities beyond those assigned to non-Honors classes).
4. **Faculty-student mentorship.** Honors students tend to seek out faculty for detailed feedback on their assignments and for more mentoring advice on their academic and career aspirations. Honors faculties are expected to provide timely, constructive and clear feedback on assignments as well as to be accessible to consult with students during office hours.

Add-On Honors Courses

Add-On” Honors sections: where students attend class with traditional students in a correlative section but also have the enrichment experiences associated with the instructor and a somewhat different pattern of assignments and expectations.

For the most part, Honors classes are Honors sections of regular college courses. They meet the same general education, departmental, and college requirements that their specific non-Honors counterparts do.

Its addition of selective courses is intended to provide demanding academic and intellectual learning opportunities encouraging self-examination, reassessment and development. Students are also required to serve the community through course projects and participate in group cultural events, which aim to promote good citizenship, social responsibility, cultural awareness and intellectual rigor.

Syllabi Basics

Basic Syllabi should meet minimum requirements set by ASU-Beebe. Instructors may use the current Basic college Syllabus Template. The syllabus does not need to contain the same format as the template, but it must contain the same information that the template would provide. This serves as the minimum starting point for all syllabi.

Honors Course Design

There is no unified model, pedagogy, or structure for teaching an Honors course. Best-practices for teaching transcend both Honors and non-Honors courses. As faculty, we are aware of our own unique teaching style that mostly follows the traditional teacher-centered approach. However, the student-centered approach is highly encouraged as the instructors facilitate, coaches and assists students in their learning. This approach highlights student choice and facilitates connections among students.

According to the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), most Honors courses will mostly incorporate the following overarching objectives. These, in turn, may be expressed in different ways through the learning outcomes that we must use in our syllabi at ASU-Beebe. In your honors course design, you should consider how your outcomes will align not only with those suggested by the NCHC but also with our own ASU-Beebe Student Success Outcomes.

Objectives (as suggested by the National Collegiate Honors Council)

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

1. To help students develop effective written communication skills (including the ability to make effective use of the information and ideas they learn);
2. To help students develop effective oral communication skills (while recognizing that not all students are comfortable talking a lot in class);
3. To help students develop their ability to analyze and synthesize a broad range of material;

4. To help students understand how scholars think about problems, formulate hypotheses, research those problems, and draw conclusions about them; and to help students understand how creative artists approach the creative process and produce an original work;
5. To help students become more independent and critical thinkers, demonstrating the ability to use knowledge and logic when discussing an issue or an idea, while considering the consequences of their ideas, for themselves, for others, and for society.

Let us consider each of these briefly.

#1 Developing written communication skills

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

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

#2 Developing oral communication skills

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

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

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

The use of primary sources allows students to develop their own interpretations instead of relying on someone else's. Cross-disciplinary readings are especially valuable, in that they give students the opportunity to synthesize ideas. But primary sources are not necessarily limited to published texts or original documents. They can, for example, be the students' own experiences, the results of surveys or questionnaires, works of art or music, films, videos, and the like. What is important is that students have an opportunity to be engaged by primary material.

Exploring issues and problems in depth may mean that the course covers less material than conventional courses. In many courses, the amount of material covered is less important than the way the material is handled. Students need to learn to see the broad implications of each issue, as well as learning to analyze and synthesize the material. In this way, students will be able to apply what they have learned to other situations.

#5 Helping students become independent and critical thinkers

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

The Honors Program

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