

Designing and Teaching an Interdisciplinary Honors Seminar

Our mission in the Honors College at Marshall University is to provide an environment for innovative teaching and learning within an **interdisciplinary** curriculum motivated by creative, critical inquiry and respect for a multiplicity of thoughts, experiences, and identities. The Honors College collaborates with university and public partners to foster inclusive academic excellence in a diverse and supportive community of scholars dedicated to becoming socially conscious, responsible leaders and lifelong learners engaged in the acquisition and application of knowledge for a greater good.

Thus, to deliver on the overarching promise of demonstrably enhanced learning experiences, faculty who teach honors-designated courses are *encouraged to challenge themselves* through their pedagogy by devising their own uniquely creative approaches to teaching and within their inspirational mentorship of students. The Honors College wants to provide opportunities for our students, of course, but we also foster the professional development of faculty who serve the university by teaching courses that serve Honors students from all of its college. We know that teaching honors can enrich not only your life as faculty but also the lives of all students with whom you work—not just those encountered in Honors courses. We believe the Honors College serves as an “incubator” for pedagogical exploration and innovation that enhances the quality of educational experiences across the university. Our relationship with those who teach for us is an engaged, collaborative partnership for the common good.

Why Teach Honors?

The Honors College needs faculty to teach courses that constitute the required elements of the Honors Curriculum that our students must complete in order to achieve graduation in University Honors through the Honors College. We do not have our own cadre of faculty. Frankly, this fact helps inspire the collaboration and innovation across colleges and disciplines that is basic to our mission. Without our own faculty, we work with various departments throughout the University to arrange for each class with the HON designation. Teaching in the Honors College isn't required of faculty. While unrequired, teaching in Honors adds to a faculty member's accomplishments in teaching (for reasons that are related to what are, we think, the “perks” of teaching in honors, as suggested below) and are properly considered service to the university as a whole. Generally speaking, such teaching and service constitutes important contributions to Tenure & Promotion portfolios. The Honors College serves the entire University.

1. Teaching in honors offers faculty the opportunity to “think outside the box” of their regular teaching duties. In some cases, there may be limited opportunity to explore outside of the routine demands of a particular teaching load. Even among faculty who regularly design and offer new courses within their departments, Honors students are especially disciplined and ready to explore new ideas and approaches that faculty may have considered, but have not had a chance to implement given practical restrictions

born of, for example, large classes that inhibit the personal approaches enabled by our enrollment-limited seminars.

2. The opportunity to teach small, seminar-style classes of motivated, well-prepared, inquisitive, and responsible students facilitates innovation by allowing faculty to push boundaries without the same degree of worry about whether students can make the necessary connections to “keep up.” Think of the spirit of collaboration that can develop between teacher and student who chose to explore new ideas through fresh perspectives together. It is singularly gratifying.

Need more inspiration? Consider “[On the Benefits of Teaching Honors.](#)”

Syllabi Basics

Syllabi should meet minimum requirements set by [MU Board of Governors Policy No. AA-14](#). To assure compliance with policy, you may use of the current [Basic Syllabus Template](#). Briefly stated, your syllabus does not need to have the same format as the template, but it must contain the same information that the template would provide. This is the minimum starting point for all syllabi at Marshall University.

Course Design

According to the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), most Honors courses will incorporate—in ways that express particulars of each instructor and institution—each of the following overarching objectives. These, in turn, may be expressed in different ways through the learning outcomes that must use in our syllabi at Marshall. In designing your seminar for the Honors College, you should consider how your outcomes will align not only with those suggested by the NCHC but also with our own [Marshall University Baccalaureate Degree Profile](#), which describes the competencies that students who complete a baccalaureate degree at Marshall University should be able to demonstrate. Note that these are framed—unlike those that we are using in our syllabi, which are *learner-centered* outcomes—as statements about what you are expected to do through the coursework that you design and, of course, the teaching and mentorship that you will do.

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 also 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.

You can read more about how the NCHC thinks about each of their stated objectives on the webpage “Honors Course Design” listed in the Recommended Readings and Resources below. You may like to review the NCHC’s [“Definition of Honors Education.”](#)

While all Marshall students should have accumulated experiences and resultant competencies over the full course of their studies suggested by the Baccalaureate Degree Profile, honors education seeks to enhance *depth and breadth* across the Honors Curriculum as a whole as well as in any single Honors course. It is important to bear in mind that we will be asking Honors students to do what may be considered *more complex or advanced* academic work and **not** simply more work. Thus, we are keen to emphasize the particulars of what we consider Honors education as suggested in the objectives above—which are aimed at instructors to guide thinking about the kinds of learning experiences a course should facilitate—and described, for example, in the Recommended Resources & Readings below.

When developing your own learning objectives, or what we generally refer to at Marshall as “outcomes” that speak to what we want students to achieve and that which we will therefore assess, go about preparing them in the manner shown in the [Basic Syllabus Template](#) with clear “alignments” indicated in a table between each stated outcome, how students will practice each outcome in your course, and how students achievement of each outcome will be assessed. In preparing your own outcomes, which must be *measurable*, you should refer to [Bloom’s Taxonomy of Measurable Verbs](#) as provided by the OAPR to assist faculty. Thinking in these terms can encourage the active, learner-centered approach to course design that the Honors College is looking for in honors-designated courses. In general, students in these courses should be expected to critique, analyze, and evaluate course materials, which are likely to be *primary* in nature such as journal articles rather material as presented, well-digested, in a textbook. *Additionally, Honors seminars should incorporate at least three of the learning outcomes specified in the following section.*

We would like to see courses that allow students to familiarize themselves with the particular practices and standards of professionalism in given disciplines. Drawing faculty from across the university helps us to provide this kind of exposure to our students. While Honors students may have in common a high degree of self-motivation and intellectual curiosity, they are diverse in their interests, experiences and, of course, their major course of study. Therefore, while in-depth exploration of topics should be the approach—where instructors draw on a range of disciplines to present ideas within in their own area of specialization in an inter- or cross-disciplinary manner—courses must be accessible (without expectation of prerequisite knowledge) to non-specialists.

Working from your own particular disciplinary training and expertise, think about how you might incorporate elements of experiential, hands-on learning as would be appropriate in your

discipline. We are always keen to enhance opportunities for professional development and exposure, for all students, that may include, in terms familiar to the academic, for example, opportunities to present at conferences and/or contribute to undergraduate publications. In this way, we encourage students to interact with and articulate their knowledge and understanding to audiences beyond their professor and immediate, classroom peers. This dissemination of knowledge and experience also serves our goal of adding value to communities beyond the Honors College. Further, learning outside of the classroom through such things as site visits, “service” projects, and field-based research, allow for “real-world” connections with course content as well as an emphasis on exploration, discovery, and application. Incorporating such opportunities can provide means of “authentic assessment.” If we consider that a critical component of our mission as an institution of higher learning is to develop students who will be informed, capable, and productive citizens, then we should provide learning opportunities for students to perform tasks (assignments, if you will) that at least replicate challenges that they will encounter in the world as citizens and, specifically, as credentialed professionals.

Thus, if we emphasize “leadership” among those qualities that we would like to see among Honors students, then we should provide opportunities for students to practice and demonstrate skills that we consider essential elements for an effective leader. That’s “real world” stuff, you might say, versus simply reading about the idea of leadership—though, without doubt, opportunities to explore examples set by remarkable leaders (both widely known and obscure) through biographical or autobiographical account can certainly provide vital background and insight to help guide decisions that students may make when asked to take on tasks that require them to demonstrate leadership qualities.

Following this thread, you might consider then how—beginning with the “nuts and bolts” of your course—you can allow for *more student input, creativity, and control*. We are encouraging exploration, independence, and intellectual risk taking. This may require some greater openness and flexibility than might be true for other courses you have taught. We can, for example, focus on providing explicit expectations for students in a given assignment (at least in part through our stated learning outcomes), while leaving the particular “route” a student might take to achieve the outcome somewhat more elastic than might be the case within a non-Honors course—or, at least, providing several options that students must exercise judgement to consider and select among given the particulars of their own case.

Learning Outcomes of the Honors College

Guided by its mission, the Honors College has the following learning outcomes, which we expect that students completing the required Honors Curriculum will have achieved. *Honors seminars should incorporate at least **three** of these outcomes among the faculty designated outcomes for their seminar.*

- make connections while adapting and applying skills and learning among varied disciplines, domains of thinking, experiences, and situations.

- outline divergent solutions to a problem, develop and explore potentially controversial proposals, and synthesize ideas or expertise to generate original plans and approaches.
- evaluate the effectiveness of their own work, reflect on strengths and weakness of their knowledge and skills in defined areas, and devise ways to make improvements.
- produce cohesive oral, written, and visual communications capable of connecting effectively with specific audiences.
- appraise how cultural beliefs and practices affect inter-group communication, how specific approaches to global issues may affect communities differently, and how varying economic, religious, social, or geographical interests can result in conflict.
- demonstrate principles of ethical citizenship and socially responsible leadership through collaborative partnerships.
- evaluate how academic theories and public policy inform one another to support civic well-being.

Recommended Resources & Readings

Meant to prepare faculty to submit the [Honors Seminar Proposal Form](#) [the link here being an offline aid to visualize the required online form] this guide is by no means comprehensive in its overview of what may constitute a seminar in Honors education. We encourage you to explore further as you develop your course(s) and to engage with us as you think about what you would like to do in your coursework—both in and outside the Honors College. Here are some suggestions as well as material referenced in the guide. As with this guide, the articles referenced below are meant to give you a sense of what might constitute a “culture of honors” rather than offer explicit “how to” statements for putting together a course. Thinking about the particulars of a cultural fabric that might generally constitute honors education and, thus, provide a basis for its outward, social expression, is a good place to start—but, of course, I’m an anthropologist, so it stands to reason that I might think that. What do you think?

- Baccalaureate Degree Profile: Marshall University Core Domains of Critical Thinking. (n.d.). <http://www.marshall.edu/assessment/baccalaureate-degree-profile/>. Marshall University.
- Honors Course Design. (n.d.). <https://nchc.site-ym.com/page/coursedesign?> National Collegiate Honors Council.
- Definition of Honors Education. (n.d.) https://www.nchchonors.org/uploaded/NCHC_FILES/PDFs/Definition-of-Honors-Education.pdf. National Collegiate Honors Council.
- Ladenheim, M., Kuhns, K., & Brockington, M. (2011). [Ethnogenesis: The Construction and Dynamics of the Honors Classroom Culture](#). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, (Spring/Summer), 129-140
- Mueller, J. (2016). What is Authentic Assessment? <http://jfmuller.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox/whatisit.htm>.
- Slavin, C. (2008). [Defining Honors Culture](#). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, (Spring/Summer), 5-8.

- Werth, Alexander, "On The Benefits of Teaching Honors" (2005). *Honors in Practice -- Online Archive*. 19. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchchip/19>

Feel free to contact us. We look forward to working with you.

The Honors College

Marshall University
One John Marshall Drive
Huntington, WV 25755

304.696.5421

www.marshall.edu/honors

honorscollege@marshall.edu

Guide prepared by **Brian A. Hoey, PhD**

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