Honors Foundational Documents

Definition of Honors Education, from the NCHC Board of Directors (November 6, 2013)

A. Definition of Honors Education
The National Collegiate Honors Council recognizes an honors college, program, institute, or equivalent descriptor, as the academic unit on a collegiate campus responsible for devising and delivering in-class and extracurricular academic experiences that provide a distinctive learning environment for selected students. The honors college or program provides opportunities for measurably broader, deeper, and more complex learning-centered and learner-directed experiences for its students than are available elsewhere in the institution; these opportunities are appropriately tailored to fit the institution’s culture and mission and frequently occur within a close community of students and faculty. In most cases, the honors community is composed of carefully selected teachers and students who form a cross- or multi-disciplinary cohort dedicated to achieving exceptional learning and personal standards. The National Collegiate Honors Council recognizes “departmental honors” as educational experiences that are similar but restricted to cohorts of students pursuing the same field of academic study.

B. Modes of Honors Learning
The following descriptions of honors learning are intended to complement and supplement the “Definition of Honors Education.” The definition is deliberately general in order to encompass a wide range of successful honors programs and colleges without trying to establish one model of honors as more valid than another; it is, in short, an overarching concept of the varieties of honors experience.

The “Modes of Learning” section makes no attempt to catalog the way that honors is constructed at various institutions or to say that any particular element of a program or set of characteristics is fundamental, nor does it attempt to encompass all valuable components of an honors program or college.

The modes suggested here are neither ranked nor mutually exclusive; it would be unusual to find a model that included only one of them. Associated with the modes are definable skill sets that are regarded as especially valuable in honors learning. Honors courses foster student development or transformation in some or all of the following measurable outcomes: 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.

The modes of learning described below include various special approaches. Not all approaches are included; in some programs, for example, accelerated forms of learning are closely associated with honors, usually entailing either advanced placement in tiered or stepped curricula or intensive work to cover more of the curriculum faster. Also, some of the categories overlap: undergraduate research, for instance, is the focus of “Research and Creative Scholarship” and “Breadth / Enduring Questions.”

Research and Creative Scholarship (“learning in depth”)
• Curricula are characterized by highly focused, often discipline-oriented learning experiences: an emphasis on research writing in the humanities and social sciences, including
data analysis in the social sciences, and on experimentation, measurement, data analysis, and interpretation in the natural sciences.

- Programs are often departmentally driven, based, or focused; “departmental honors” is a term that often appears. Courses tend to be created within existing departments, with honors components supplementing regular work. The goal is specialized, in-depth learning in addition to self-reflective, analytical, and creative activity.
- The products are often documented scholarship that leads to new integrations, new knowledge, or new understandings of creative products; students pursue a track into postgraduate study, technical careers, or professional careers outside academe, such as telecommunications or theatre.

Breadth and Enduring Questions (“multi- or interdisciplinary learning”)
- Curricula are characterized largely by core-curriculum honors courses, often with seminars that provide greater depth (not necessarily disciplinary depth).
- Programs confront students with alternative modes of inquiry, exploration, discovery, tolerance of ambiguity, and enduring questions. Coursework often requires integrative learning: both local and global learning with connections across time, genre, and disciplines, not always in classroom situations.
- The products often involve creative integrations of evidence from several disciplines with an aggressive emphasis on interdisciplinarity. Assessment of the products emphasizes process rather than product, focusing on metacognitive questions such as “how do you know?” Students are encouraged to dig deep without a prescribed result.

Service Learning and Leadership
- The major emphasis is community engagement: often a single project or a series of collaborative projects that address real-world problems and through which students acquire practical experience and skills that lead to engaged citizenship. Some opportunities are offered for credit, some not.
- Curricula are frequently decentralized or selected from a menu of departmental honors courses. Students may also earn credit for philanthropic or humanitarian service off-campus. This structure may operate at some smaller institutions that emphasize the humanities and social sciences.

Experiential Learning
- Curricula typically emphasize exploration and/or discovery rather than acquisition of specific knowledge sets; a focus on hands-on, usually supervised, practical engagement with usable outcomes can also occur.
- Programs focus on student-driven learning projects facilitated by faculty who provide no necessary, single conclusion to be drawn by all or many students. Programs often include international experience and active learning.
- The process often involves continuous reflective writing and oral presentation as the students articulate their discoveries and document their personal growth; this process may apply to all other modes described here.

Learning Communities
- Curricula emphasize an identified cohort of students living and/or working in close quarters and heavily engaged in campus and/or residence-centered activity with a strong integration of academic, social, and/or service activities.
- Programs foster a culture of thinking, growing, and inquiring within the living environment.
• Outcomes include 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.

Syllabus Note Template (this is just an example, please feel free to edit, revise, add as you see fit to suit your Honors course plan and approach!)

A Note about Honors: This is a designated Honors course, which means that in addition to the standard course outcomes and objectives, this course will include the four identifiable elements of Honors education: 1) critical thinking, reading & writing; 2) independent research instruction; 3) interdisciplinary approaches; and 4) student engagement opportunities. All Honors courses at Reynolds feature these components, allowing a consistent experience across the Honors curriculum that helps to prepare students for successful transfer to 4-year institutions. Honors courses do not necessarily feature significantly more work; instead, the quality of the work expected is more complex and rigorous than what students may find in a standard course offering. Honors courses will also feature learner-centered and learner-directed teaching styles, which require students to interact, participate, collaborate, and lead, taking a more active role in the classroom and often to engage outside of the classroom in opportunities for hands-on, experiential learning.
Honors Course Proposal Framework

The Reynolds Honors program emphasizes the following core components: critical thinking, independent research, interdisciplinary inquiry, and engagement. Course proposals should demonstrate rigorous intellectual inquiry and commitment to student engagement and participation. The following outline serves as a framework for submitting an honors course or honors contract proposal. The bullet points provide ideas to consider and are not meant to be an exhaustive or required list of characteristics.

1. **Rigorous Content:** How will the *content* distinguish this course or option as honors curriculum?
   - Focus on deeper (not necessarily broader) content
   - Emphasize primary texts or recent publications within the discipline rather than textbooks
   - Develop advanced reading, writing and information literacy skills
   - Develop skills to evaluate claims, evidence and conclusions
   - Explore relevant interdisciplinary connections and focus on methodologies within the main discipline
   - Demonstrate how professionals conduct discussions within the discipline
   - Incorporate the 4 pillars of Honors in explicit ways

2. **Instruction:** How will *instructional methods* distinguish this course or option as honors curriculum?
   - Incorporate innovative pedagogical approaches
   - Provide support for integrative learning
   - Offer opportunities outside of the classroom for enrichment related to course material
   - Foster active participatory experiences
   - Challenge students to think in new ways
   - Encourage students to collaborate in solving problems and producing intellectual work

3. **Assignments and Activities:** How will the *assignments and activities* distinguish this course or option as honors curriculum?
   - Place responsibility for learning upon the student
   - Integrate cumulative learning
   - Incorporate connections to real-world problems, settings, communities and outcomes
   - Require students to be active learners
   - Provide opportunities for students to use drafts, peer feedback and other iterative strategies to improve end products
   - Cultivate leadership qualities

4. **Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment:** How will *learning outcomes and assessment measures* distinguish this course or option as honors curriculum?
   - Incorporate higher cognitive and metacognitive skills
   - Integrate knowledge and skills
   - Provide a range of assessments of learning, including projects, performances, presentations, and/or service learning activities
Provide measurable objectives that students will be expected to accomplish

--adapted from Lane Community College Honors Program Curriculum Criteria and Framework

- Honors assignments should focus on the higher order thinking skills: applying, analyzing, evaluating, creating.

Revision to Bloom’s Taxonomy (2001)

Figure 1. Diagrammatic Representation of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Thinking

Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy
Commonly, Bloom’s taxonomy is applied by identifying verbs that are related to the specific levels, writing objectives or questions that reflect the action. These are usually the kind of thinking that the student will be asked to engage in. Common verbs that are associated with the various levels are listed in the following table. The Green areas are the revisions while the Red areas are the original Bloom’s Taxonomy.

Table 1. Bloom’s Taxonomy Revised

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Domain</th>
<th>Verbs – some examples… (The student will…):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remembering</td>
<td>Identify, define, memorize, tell, copy, recite, record, label, match, and quote.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Summarize, paraphrase, relate, cite, convert, describe, explain, interpret, classify, and indicate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying</td>
<td>Experiment, sketch, construct, prepare, report, implement, manipulate, complete, solve, and apply.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing</td>
<td>Compare, contrast, differentiate, prioritize, investigate, deconstruct, discriminate, calculate, analyze, and correlate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>Criticize, judge, evidence, support, defend, predict, argue, hypothesize, critique, and evaluate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cognitive Domain | Verbs – some examples… (The student will…):
--- | ---
Creating | Generate, design, construct, plan, compose, create, write, modify, compile, and produce.

Honors Course Characteristics

In principle, HONR courses should adhere to various combinations of the following educational standards:

- **Academic Depth and Rigor** – Emphasize the exploration of the subject matter in unique and thorough fashion. Honors courses should be qualitatively different from non-Honors courses. The expectation is that they should be more challenging and demanding not because they assign more work or are evaluated more rigorously, but because students gain more intellectually and academically from the Honors experience.

- **Inter-disciplinarity** – Collaborate with other faculty to expose students to productive and creative connections among different disciplinary theories, knowledge and methods for the purpose of giving students a broad and integrated perspective on human knowledge and encourage them to make new connections on their own.

- **Pedagogical Innovation** – Provide a stimulating teaching and learning experience, and experiment with interesting/innovative topics, creative pedagogical techniques and the latest available technology.

- **Student Engagement** – Find creative ways to stimulate students’ participation in all course sessions. The model, to some extent, is to approximate a graduate seminar for undergraduates.

- **Student Creativity and Independence** – Offer students the opportunity to chart and own their original learning path through the course and “discover” knowledge on their own through discussion, critical reading, writing, laboratory experience, research, creative endeavors, etc.

- **Ethical and Personal Reflection** – Motivate students to understand the ethical consequences of their decisions, actions and beliefs; articulate grounded personal standards (values) against which they can evaluate new ideas or experiences; and make informed and principled decisions. Encourage students actively to reflect on the relevance of the course material to their educational, professional and professional lives – for example through a reflective journal in which they summarize readings, record personal responses to new knowledge, and generate questions for further investigation.

- **Primary Sources** – Encourage the use of original texts and data, materials and other primary sources, as well as new technologies in creative, research-type course assignments.
• **Experiential Learning** – Offer creative and innovative hands-on, project-based learning opportunities related to solving real world problems.

• **Teamwork** – Enable students to demonstrate leadership and collaborative skills by designing course activities that bring them together in multidisciplinary teams to work on specific tasks.

• **Co-and Extra Curricular Activities** – Promote learning outside the formal classroom through such activities as field research, service learning, and co-curricular experiences.

• **Intense Student-Faculty Interaction** – Promote frequent and meaningful contacts and feedback between instructor(s) and students properly to convey the excitement that first motivated each of the faculty to involve themselves in their discipline.

• **Global and Civic Engagement** – Encourage students to learn and/or connect with cultures and peoples from around the world. Offer students meaningful service learning opportunities within the Boston community in connection with Honors courses.

--from Northeastern University Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning through Research

**Honors Teaching** (from NCHChonors.org)

In general an Honors program or college is designed to ensure that the most academically motivated students are challenged to achieve at their highest potential as individuals while preparing for their responsibilities to the community. Although each Honors program and course is unique, all Honors courses are expected to develop Honors students’ ability to think critically, and many if not most also emphasize critical reading and effective writing.

Honors curricula encourage students to pursue active learning experiences, such as independent study, undergraduate research, and study abroad, or to seek learner-centered courses that fall outside of the typical curriculum, such as field study, seminars, mini-courses, or internships.

What is the student profile for Honors? Honors students tend to be highly motivated and high achievers. They respond with intensity to ideas, classroom discussions, and problem-solving. They can be highly creative and innovative. They are frequently willing to take on difficult and in-depth projects. They are often involved in the campus community to a greater extent than other students.

Honors courses tend to be both reading- and writing-intensive. Therefore, it is appropriate to include numerous writing assignments of varying lengths and types: formal analytical essays perhaps 5 to 8 pages in length; literature analysis and synthesis and research papers from 10 to 20 pages in length; book reports; reports appropriate to specific scientific disciplines; reaction papers; in-class writing; informal writing (1-to-3 page
assignments that have students explore a particular topic, answer a specific question, or accomplish particular objectives set by the instructors); and revisions of any or all of the above. Other components could include small group work and write-ups, oral presentations, or community service components that tie in to class concerns.

Honors instructors should assess student writing with the goals of honing each student’s skills in such things as composition mechanics (grammar, spelling, punctuation); analysis and logic; style (sentence structure and diction); thesis construction; writing effective introductions; paragraph development; and the use of supporting evidence; as well as the skills to write for particular "genres" of writing, such as literary analysis, historical analysis, scientific studies and reports, film reviews, analysis of art, and so on.

You will find many Honors students very capable in the classroom: they are eager to talk, to contribute their ideas, and to critique the ideas of others. Therefore, the quality and nature of your discussions become central to the success of your course. Many instructors opt to use one or a mixture of the following kinds of discussions to enhance the flow of ideas in the classroom: call and response (the Socratic method) led by the instructor, free-flowing discussions led by the students, small-group discussions within the class room that are focused on particular issues, structured debates and student-led discussions prepared ahead of time through student-generated lists of questions or topics relevant to the reading materials.

Because many Honors students can be very verbal, it may be useful to establish guidelines for communication, sharing the floor, respect for the speaker, and so on.

Outside the classroom, you may want to encourage your students to participate in the larger academic community: university lectures, films, and so on. Consider building some extracurricular events into the syllabus of your courses; or have students attend lectures or events on an extra-credit basis.

Students often enjoy meeting and socializing with their instructors outside the class setting. You might think of hosting a pizza evening at your home or arranging an informal get-together to discuss the class’s issues in another venue besides the classroom.

Many instructors assign office conferences as part of their syllabus requirements. Students find it particularly helpful to attend conferences on their writing assignments, drafts, or research.

It is very important to set high expectations for your Honors students and to do so in a timely fashion, e.g., at the beginning of the term. Difficulties that arise in any given semester, and in any given Honors class, often have to do with particular expectations not being clarified at the outset. In Honors classes, it might be helpful to immediately convey to students that the course will be enriching and challenging; that it will spend considerable time honing the students’ abilities in critical thinking, analytical writing, close reading, cogent speaking, and attentive listening; and that students are, to a large extent, responsible for the quality of the learning experience that they will have. They will be expected to participate thoughtfully and fully in all aspects of the class.
Honors Course Design (from NCHChonors.org)

Every Honors instructor is different and every Honors course is different. Still, there do seem to be some characteristics that are common to many, if not most, Honors courses. Below are some guidelines that you may find helpful. In the words of one Honors faculty member, the finest instructors are those who are "willing to share the responsibility for teaching and learning with their students. The key to a successful Honors program is not the intelligence of the student or the subject matter of the course, but the attitude and approach of the instructor."

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

1. To help students develop effective written communication skills (including the ability to make effective use of the information and ideas they learn);
2. To help students develop effective oral communication skills (while recognizing that not all students are comfortable talking a lot in class);
3. To help students develop their ability to analyze and synthesize a broad range of material;
4. To help students understand how scholars think about problems, formulate hypotheses, research those problems, and draw conclusions about them; and to help students understand how creative artists approach the creative process and produce an original work;
5. To help students become more independent and critical thinkers, demonstrating the ability to use knowledge and logic when discussing an issue or an idea, while considering the consequences of their ideas, for themselves, for others, and for society.

Let us consider each of these briefly:

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

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

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

Developing the ability to analyze, to synthesize, and to understand scholarly work

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

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

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

Helping students become independent and critical thinkers

Students become independent thinkers and critical thinkers (Objective 5) by working independently, yet under the guidance of responsive teachers. Therefore, an Honors course should give students a great deal of opportunity to think, write, and produce on their own (and in collaboration with their classmates) - as with papers and projects - and should give their work 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.

Honors courses should also create a classroom environment that is open to many perspectives and points of view, where students are encouraged to take intellectual risks and feel safe doing so, where they learn to respect each other (although not necessarily each others’ ideas), and where they are taught to consider both the immediate and long term consequences of their own ideas.

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

But for students to become truly active participants in their learning, they must become intellectual risk-takers. Therefore, Honors instructors themselves should be willing to take risks - to teach in a different manner, to be open to challenges from students, to be willing to let the classroom discussion roam freely yet fruitfully.

While Honors courses need to help students develop intellectually, instructors also need to hold them responsible for meeting the course requirements. Honors students may be brighter than the average student - more intellectually skeptical and (usually) highly motivated - but they are not necessarily better organized, better informed, or better prepared for their classes. Just like other students, they need to learn good work habits. Still, it would be unfair to hold them to a higher standard in this regard; most are, after all, 18 to 21 years old. Also, when designing an Honors course, it is important to remember that Honors courses are not meant to have more work for the sake of more work or harder work for the sake of harder work. The amount of work and its difficulty should serve a legitimate pedagogical purpose.