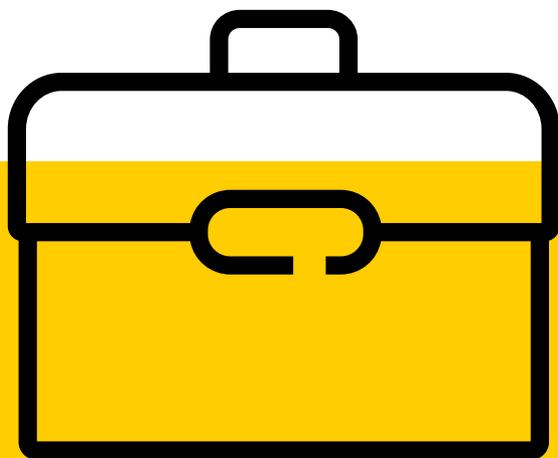


UNIVERSITY OF IOWA HONORS PROGRAM

# TEACHING TOOLKIT



By Dr. Emily Hill, Addison  
Woll, and Holly Yoder

# HONORS TEACHING TOOLKIT

*University Honors philosophy, best  
practices, and examples for support teaching  
honors*

ADDISON WOLL; EMILY D. HILL; AND HOLLY  
YODER

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## CHAPTER 1.

### WHY HONORS?

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*University Honors Program philosophy*

ADDISON WOLL



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://pressbooks.uiowa.edu/honorsprogram-teachingtoolkit/?p=23#oembed-1>

Honors education poses an ill-structured problem regarding its administration and as such there are many competing theories, assumptions, values, and applications labelled as best practice. It is no surprise then that honors programs at various colleges and universities look, feel, and operate quite differently from each other. For example, some institutions have honors in the form of additional course projects and a senior thesis (such as Southeast Missouri State University and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln which require a number of honors

courses and a thesis project to complete honors). Other honors programs have separate honors colleges with faculty separate from STEM and Liberal Arts colleges (such as William Jewell College, having a rigorous interview process, such that only 3% of the student population are honors students. This program also enables students to spend two of their four collegiate years finishing their studies either at Cambridge or Oxford). As you can tell, the amount of resources made available to honors programs also has a wide range. In this chapter we will share the philosophical and theoretical foundations for the UI Honors Program. We hope this will help you to envision how your honors course contributes to the greater mission of honors education at Iowa.

The UI Honors Program's founding philosophy was based on a student centered approach with the idea that making connections is an ideal pathway to provide this support. The mission statement reads:

Honors at Iowa enriches the undergraduate experience by cultivating intellectual curiosity and practical skill through challenging coursework, creative engagement, and experiential learning to nurture a deeper understanding of one's discipline and self.

and is further elaborated by the vision statement:

We envision Honors at Iowa as an inclusive and supportive community for high achieving students who are in the process of understanding the broader significance of their education, life experiences, and relationships with the goal of awareness and self-authorship.

In our outreach to prospective UI students we claim that honors courses are, in general, neither more work nor

harder than standard classes. Rather, the goal of honors courses is to engage creatively and more meaningfully with the course content, peers, and instructor. Honors classes expect *more*, but not necessarily more *work*. As will be described in later chapters, an honors course at the general education level does not have to be substantially different from a standard offering in order to offer added value to the students. Furthermore, it is the desire of the UI Honors Program that students are not unfairly graded in honors sections compared to standard offerings, such as graded on a section curve instead of a whole course curve or assigned additional graded projects not included in standard sections.

Theoretically, the author's view is that honors programs' role on every campus can be described by Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST). A quick summary, the EST states that an individual exists within multiple spheres of exterior influence, and as the individual's complexity increases so too can their interaction with their environment. EST also theorizes that optimal individual development rests upon a tailored ecological niche. Viewed through this lens, the Honors Program serves the same purpose as Liberal Arts Beyond Bars (LABB) and TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) programs, all of which seek to optimally challenge and support students by fostering an environment in which that student can thrive. This aligns with the traditional view of most honors programs, where the program in effect expects more from honors students than other collegiate students due to the developed skill sets and aptitudes honors students possess which allow them to thrive within academic settings. Historically this stretch goal was thought best accomplished by restricting access

which unfortunately created the assumption of elitism. Setting high expectations encourages honors students to stretch and grow, rather than coast through on perceived strengths.

The Honors Program's approach to student success uses Marcia Baxter Magolda's [Theory of Self-Authorship](#) (self-authorship) as well as Patricia King and Karen Kitchner's [Reflective Judgement Model](#) (RJM) as its foundational groundings. Many of the changes the UI Honors Program (UIHP) has undergone in the past four academic years are based upon the Theory of Self-Authorship and Reflective Judgment Model. These theories are stage based student cognitive development theories which use the epistemological view of constructivism, meaning that knowledge is co-created by the learners, their peers, and knowledgeable others. In both self-authorship and the RJM, evidence supports the ability of traditionally aged college students to begin progression from phase one in self-authorship and the quasi-reflective judgment stages in RJM to the final respective stages. These cognitive theories are corroborated by the physiological evidence that the frontal cortex, which regulates complex executive function, does not finish its development until age 25 on average. This progression is demonstrated by the student cognitively moving beyond an appreciation that knowledge (data) can be messy to understanding that knowledge is constructed through processing ill-structured problems—not prevented by them. The student will also transition from using external sources to describe their sense of self (beliefs, values, goals), to creating their own sense of self and finally use their individually derived sense of self to determine how to

navigate life's challenges. The research supporting and based on self-authorship and RJM indicates that this final stage is reached by a plurality of college students by their graduation date, but not the majority on average. It is a continual goal to be applied by each of us to the diverse and sometimes divergent aspects of our lives. For these reasons the UI Honors Program has been focusing on reflection, introspection, and other meaning-making criteria for students to earn honors credits.

The goals of the Honors Program are not substantially different than those of any student support program on campus. Our differences reside in the student populations we serve and the student success scaffolding practices utilized. Creating formal ecological niches for students allows increased community building and sense of belonging which is key to student retention according to Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Departure. Scaffolding meaning-making throughout a student's time at Iowa is shown to support development of critical thinking skills and student success in life post-college. I hope you will think of Honors as another tool to aid in the success of your students.

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## CHAPTER 2.

### SAME MATERIAL, DIFFERENT APPROACH

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*Honors sections with same material as standard sections*

HOLLY YODER

As part of his general education curriculum, David, a first-year actuarial science major, took an honors class that he described as “almost purely discussion-based,” which analyzed the politics of film. He said, “**My professor led our discussions into territory that I would never have considered, and I came out of that class with some great insights.** I cannot turn off my analytical lens when watching movies ever since that class.”

In honors classes, students build an intellectual community that challenges and supports them. Along with enlightening professor-led discussions, honors students strongly value learning alongside their fellow honors students. Because of the benefits of peer to peer interaction, sometimes the best teaching strategy is to lean into the fact that the main characteristic making the class an honors class is that it is full of honors students. For this reason, honors sections do not necessarily have

to contain different or additional material in order to give students an honors-worthy classroom experience.

Madison, a first-year English major, said that she found her honors general education classes to be “very similar to my regular classes when it came to coursework and content,” and that the honors classes were “beneficial to my learning because I was able to **meet other students of different years in the Honors Program** and the **class sizes tended to be smaller**, which allowed for **more discussion, access to help with questions, and overall, a better experience** in the classroom.”

Two aspects of such “same material, different approach” classes can transform the experience: (1) honors students connecting with and learning directly from the professor and (2) honors students connecting with and learning from each other. This relational approach is appropriate when the design of the class or section facilitates peer interaction and collaboration, as described by Madison above.

Lauren, a first-year biomedical sciences major, said, “I think that taking honors courses—especially honors discussions—for your classes is very beneficial because you are **surrounded by other students who take their studies very seriously**. I have had very good luck with groups in my honors discussions and think it helps greatly.”

This sense of peer support was echoed by Jenna, an orientation leader advising first-year students, who said, “I really love taking honors lab sections because I’ve had nothing but really great experiences with my honors lab partners.” An additional benefit was later “**seeing those same honors lab partners in other classes**.” Connections with peers were strengthened by the

experience of finding themselves in the same sections, something that the University seeks to orchestrate through the Courses in Common program and which happens organically for honors students in honors sections.

Beyond the power of peer-to-peer learning and community-building, in honors classes where the material is the same between standard and honors sections, the experience is additionally enhanced when the professor chooses to teach the honors discussion or lab section rather than assigning it to a teaching assistant. Students perceive both relational and educational benefits to this arrangement. Referencing a science class with lab, Jenna observed, “The lab section was **taught by the professor** instead of a teaching assistant, which made it really easy to **integrate the material we were learning in lecture to the material we were learning in lab.**” Jenna emphasized that she continued to look for honors sections of labs and discussions well after she had fulfilled the honors coursework requirement. She explained, “I appreciate those **in-depth discussions** because they help me to retain information.”

## CHAPTER 3.

# CREATIVE, INNOVATIVE AND INDIVIDUALIZED ASSIGNMENTS

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*Changing out a standard assignment for an experimental assignment or creative project*

HOLLY YODER

Changing out a standard assignment for an experimental assignment or creative project is a key strategy in the honors teaching toolkit. This may be a good option if you, the instructor, would like to pilot a new assignment idea that could later become required for all of your students if it is successful with the honors section. Alternatively, the unique assignment might prove to be a good fit for an honors section but less reliably so for a standard section, in which case it might be continued as an honors-only assignment.

The honors alternative assignment could challenge the class in any of a variety of ways. It could require robust collaboration, as in a group project; it could require students to form and publicly defend opinions; as in a debate; or it could be experiential or applied, as in a case study. The possibilities are not limited to these three. The University of Iowa Office for Teaching and Learning

Center for Teaching has great ideas and is an excellent resource for exploring alternative assignments for honors sections or classes.

Sometimes simple is best. The alternative assignment need not be fancy to be effective. Depending on the situation, it could be as simple as eliminating a test or paper and replacing it with a class discussion facilitated by the instructor, offering students a more interpersonal way to demonstrate their understanding of the class content and giving them the opportunity to get their instructor's immediate feedback.

Whatever the method, keep in mind that honors students will have opinions! We encourage you to consider honors students as collaborators in teaching and learning and adapt to their speed and interests.

Carly, a second-year honors student, said, "Honors Rhetoric has been one of my favorite classes I have taken at the University of Iowa. I loved the connections I made within that class. It was wonderful being in a class with like-minded students who also wanted to receive a quality education. Each of us was studying something different, which really enhanced my learning experience by opening me up to new perspectives and viewpoints within the course. **My professor took the time to understand us as students, and to make sure the course was geared towards our interests, skills, and abilities as honors students.** Taking rhetoric as an honors course really strengthened my writing and has helped me throughout all my semesters at Iowa. I was able to make lasting friendships with students in the course, and I am forever grateful for the experience."

Student-driven classes and assignments can lead to a flowering of creativity. In her honors general education

seminar, *Literary, Visual and Performing Arts: Harry Potter and the Quest for Enlightenment*, Donna Parsons invited her students from diverse majors to develop individualized research projects. A health sciences major, for example, might compare Alzheimer's disease with instances of memory loss in Harry Potter. A journalism major might look at the *The Daily Prophet*, a tabloid in the wizarding world, and use it to explore how the media influences the news we receive. An English major might compare correspondence in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* with correspondence in *Harry Potter*. Consultations with a reference librarian helped students to identify the best sources in folklore, astrology, music, herbology or whatever the relevant subject. Examples of other syllabi designed to incorporate creative, innovative and individualized assignments with honors students in mind can be found in chapter 8, Content Samples.

## CHAPTER 4.

### EXTRA EXTRA, READ ALL ABOUT IT!

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*Enrichment through extra projects, lectures, discussions, or experiences*

HOLLY YODER

Simply requiring more work and harder tests does not make a class honors-worthy; however, some honors classes do add an extra component, whether in the form of extra content or an additional project, when the benefit to honors students is made clear.

Before going this route, faculty might first consider whether the extra project could instead be designed to replace an existing project or assignment rather than added onto an already rigorous set of assignments. College is already hard. Honors education is not about making classes harder but about adding genuine value to the experience.

When there is a significant additional component to the honors section, it is important to be transparent and intentional to ensure student buy-in. Information about the extra project or content should be included in the syllabus or introduced during the first week of the class. Students respond well when a compelling educational

rationale is offered. By contrast, an extra assignment not listed in the syllabus, with no comparable requirement for the standard sections of the class, and sprung on the honors students in the final few weeks of the semester without their input may not be properly appreciated!

This is not specifically an honors issue but an equity issue. Paraphrasing Anna Flaming of the UI Office for Teaching, Learning and Technology, students make strategic decisions about their course load and how to balance course due dates with other obligations including family and work. Honors or not, surprises have a disproportionate impact on students with limited resources and less freedom to put off other commitments. Having a sense of purpose and the ability to plan ahead are key.

For many years, the “added component” model has been successfully used by the large Principles of Chemistry class to add enrichment for its honors students. Honors students attend extra lectures focused on research on the occasional Fridays when class is cancelled after a test. A second-year student, Kessa, said, “The extra experiences provided by these honors courses included interesting speakers and opportunities not available to the other students in the course. This helped show me how the course could be applied to real life and how it looked outside of the classroom.”

Adding an extra project is essentially applying an honors contract approach to the entire honors class and should therefore adhere as much as possible to practices recommended for honors contracts. (For more on honors contracts, see Chapter 5.) There are situations, such as the Principles of Chemistry I example, where a standardized extra assignment—attending additional lectures and

writing short responses—is the most practical way to provide a large group of students with an enriching honors experience. However, wherever possible, the extra project should be developed with student input and tailored to their interests. The instructor might set broad boundaries for the additional project in the syllabus but then engage the class itself to design and carry it out. Again, consideration should be given as to whether this project might replace a standard assignment rather than add onto the work that the honors students are already doing.

Another approach, similar to honors contracting, is to formulate the extra component with a goal of facilitating deeper interaction with the professor or among the honors students themselves. The experience of Olivia, a first-year honors student, is instructive. She said, “I had an amazing experience contracting honors credit in Elementary Psychology. A group of us met [with the professor] every week to discuss a book about how drugs can alter the mind. It gave me a chance to delve deeper into the reading and be confident asking questions.”

In this example, the professor opted not to offer an honors section at all but rather to offer honors students time and attention in an honors contract experience. While the UI Honors Program’s preference is for departments to offer more honors classes and sections, an honors contract may indeed sometimes be the most student-centered solution. In such cases, instructors might signal their commitment to serving honors students by adding to the course description in MyUI brief text such as, “Honors students will be offered an honors contract option for this class.”

In honors contracting, the extra project is not graded

and does not change the student's grade in the class. It either satisfies the contract or it doesn't. In an honors class or section that requires an extra project, consideration should be given as to how to fairly grade it. For more on grading honors classes, see chapter 7 on grading and chapter 9 on mid-semester assessment practices.

## CHAPTER 5.

# HONORS COURSEWORK CONTRACTS

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*An opportunity to combine student interests with yours for impact*

ADDISON WOLL

The honors coursework contract is offered as a collaboration between the Office of the Registrar, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and the University Honors program. Successful completion of an honors coursework contract will result in the course being designated as honors “H” on the student’s transcript. The contract option allows students to have the flexibility needed to complete honors coursework requirements, especially non-traditional students or those transferring large credits amounts from other institutions, and to enrich their class experience. Students routinely report in our various student population surveys that an honors contract project provided a meaningful connection or positive impact upon their college experience.

Who can complete an honors coursework contract at the University of Iowa?

1. Students in either the Honors Program and/or Honors in the Major use the same form for

honors coursework contracts.

2. Students must have a UI cumulative GPA of 3.30 to have access to the contract form.
3. Students enrolled in the Fall, Spring, or Summer semesters can access the contract form.
4. A student in their premier or ultimate semester can contract a course.
5. A student requesting to count more than two contracts towards the University Honors coursework requirement will be asked to provide additional need rationale to the Honors Program, but the number of contracts able to be completed is unlimited.

Why offer an honors coursework contract?

Simply put, some students are unable to find or fit an honors course section into their UI curricula. This may be because: there is a dearth of honors courses offered in their major or college; they transferred in the majority of the general education requirements via Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), dual-enrollment credit or credit from another higher education institution; or because the required courses for their major (or other obligations such as employment, family care, athletics, etc) created significant scheduling constraints.

Work done for an honors contract should be *qualitatively different in nature from that already assigned for the class*. For example, honors contract work may rely on primary sources not formally introduced in the class or it may focus more intensively on particular topics. In the past year the majority of honors contract proposals **denied** by the Honors Program involved a project turning a shorter

class assignment into a longer assignment (i.e. a five page research paper into a 10 page paper with additional sources required). The UI Honors Program is happy to continue dialogue about improving the form in terms of access and strict adherence to quality standards.

Honors contracts will ideally help both the student and instructor. For example, you may have the student do a project that covers material useful for the entire class to know and then present it to the class, or the student may research a topic you wish to cover in a future offering of the course and discuss it with you. For specific examples, see project descriptions listed at the end of this chapter.

#### Contract Requirements

- Students **are encouraged not to contract a class that already offers an honors section** unless there is a scheduling conflict.
- The **honors contract project is graded S/U and does not influence the overall grade** in the class.
- Students must earn a **B- or better** in the class in order for the honors designation to be valid.
- The project description **must provide a clear distinction** between honors contract work and the work required for the course.
- The project description must contain an **actionable timeline** for the proposal, with **built-in benchmarks**.
- Students **must submit the required form** through MyUI to earn honors credit.

We encourage students to think creatively. In my meetings with students seeking advice or directions for honors contracts, I describe an extra paper as the minimum starting point. An additional paper can be an

acceptable proposal, provided it meets the criteria listed above, but the UI Honors Program would much rather the student engage in an endeavor the student and instructor will find more meaningful. Perhaps the student is given additional readings and meets with the instructor biweekly to discuss them. This not only adds depth to the course content for the student, but also builds a potentially valuable relationship with their instructor. Contracts such as this become an increased time ask for instructors and, as such, instructors have the ability to deny a proposal as well. We encourage students to propose a contract idea to their instructor, and we welcome the instructor to provide feedback such that the contract meets both the needs of the student and the instructor.

In the Honors Senior Graduation Survey, we ask students to nominate a faculty member for the Honors Teaching Award as well as recount a memory about their time in the UI Honors Program. Three quotes below taken from this survey illustrate the potential impact of the contract experience. While students were told their comments would be shared with their nominee, we have kept their quotes anonymous here.

Doing an Honors Contract course with my Intro to Sociology professor titled “Children’s Perception of Gender Roles,” about gender socialization processes. This made me realize how much I appreciated the sociology framework and led to me taking more sociology classes and developing a personal relationship with that professor.

Jon Houtman worked with me to participate in the graduate student discussion of his immunology and human disease class for an honors contract. It helped me build skills in reading papers and applying techniques as well as a much better understanding of mouse models as used

in immunology. Those skills and the experience from the class made me feel a lot more confident as a scientist and prepared for grad school.

Dr. Leyre Castro taught me in the Research Method and Statistics in the Psychology course. While I'm taking that course, I also did Honors Contract with the professor. She taught me how to use a statistic program called R. The way she taught me how to statistically analyze data and use R sparked my interest in research. Of course, statistic analysis was difficult to learn but she made me think it was worth learning it and how valuable the statistics are to the psychology field. It made me decide to choose a grad school program that has an emphasis on research.

## Select examples of exemplary contracts

*Learning about Learning (PSY:1010)*

Read and talk about the book "Wayfinding" by M.R. O'Connor with Professor Vecera and other honors students once a week for an hour. Concept is basically a mini book club where the group can discuss the novel together.

*Musicianship and Theory II (MUS:1202)*

The final product of my efforts will be an educational video targeted towards first-year college music students with the intention to provide a resources of application of basic compositional techniques. An extended theme and variation composition (not originally required by the class) will serve as a proper context for this educational pursuit. I will research the basic principles unique to a theme and variation composition with special emphasis on the concepts of rounded binary form such as sentences, periods, and theme extension. I will then culminate this gathered information into a detailed outline of the event sequence regarding the educational video, serving as a foundation in the creation of my proposed end-product. I will then apply my researched principles of theme and variation composition into an independent composition

intended for use in the final video presentation with a step-by-step breakdown of the process of composition.

*Calculus III (MATH:2850)*

I will be researching the mathematical theory underlying neuronal firing, as well as the equations used to predict and estimate firing rates. I will write a paper outlining both the conceptual explanation behind these mathematical models and step through how each of the equations are used and derived. The math used in this will include differential equations, integration, Taylor series expansion, and other techniques similar to what is discussed in class. I will then use Mathematica to model the equations for neuronal firing to provide a visualization of these concepts.

## CHAPTER 6.

# TEACHING TO PROMOTE SELF-AUTHORSHIP

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*Learning as a personal and memorable experience*

EMILY D. HILL

### ***The Honors at Iowa Mission***

*Honors at Iowa enriches the undergraduate experience by cultivating intellectual curiosity and practical skill through challenging coursework, creative engagement, and experiential learning to nurture a deeper understanding of one's discipline and self.*

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### ***The Honors at Iowa Vision***

*We envision Honors at Iowa as an inclusive and supportive community for high achieving students who are in the process of understanding the broader significance of their education, life experiences, and relationships with the goal of awareness and self-authorship.*

As our mission and vision statements indicate, the University Honors Program emphasizes the importance of students finding their way to self-authorship. Our

program offers a variety of pathways to self-authorship through honors advising, community building, leadership opportunities, and skill-building workshops. Some of the most impactful moments of self-authorship can occur within the classroom.

An Honors course should give students the opportunity to explore what the topic may signify for their own meaning-making. What have they learned about themselves within the context of the course? What sparked their curiosity to dig deeper into the topic? How were their pre-conceived notions challenged and/or adjusted? Were there opportunities to take intellectual risks? How will they take the lessons they learned within the course and apply them within their other coursework, their career goals, and/or other aspects of their lives?

There are many pedagogical approaches to fostering self-authorship within the honors classroom while staying true to course content. Some activities may include:

- written reflection assignments that encourage meaning-making
- large or small group discussions or debates
- hands-on/experiential activities or projects
- guest speakers with an opportunity for students to ask questions

It may seem there would be certain disciplines that naturally lend themselves well to these sorts of self-authorship moments; however, with some creativity it can be done across the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. The National Collegiate Honors Council

provides some informative resources and example honors syllabi from universities across the country here: <https://nchc.site-ym.com/page/coursestdesign>

As faculty make thoughtful decisions about what learning activities will best help students to meet the course learning goals/objectives, Honors asks for faculty to think where it would be appropriate to incorporate activities that promote self-authorship. Students continually express their appreciation for opportunities in their honors classes to think about the greater application to their own lives. It is within these activities that students not only retain the course material, but learning also becomes a personal and memorable experience.

For further reading about self-authorship and meaning-making, please see articles below:

- [Creating Contexts for Learning and Self-Authorship](#) (Baxter Magolda, 1999)
- [Helping Students Make Their Way to Adulthood: Good Company for the Journey](#) (Baxter Magolda, 2002)
- [Meaning-Making in the Learning and Teaching Process](#) (Ignelzi, 2000)
- [Learning to Make Reflective Judgements](#) (King, 2000)
- [Student Learning](#) (King & Baxter Magolda)
- [Reflective Judgement](#) (King & Kitchener, 2010)

## CHAPTER 7.

# GRADING AN HONORS CLASS OR SECTION

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*It's more than just a grade*

ADDISON WOLL

**Q. What is the primary product of the modern university?**

**A. The Transcript!**

Tongue-in-cheek jokes aside, this limited line of reductionist reasoning indicates that assessment of a class and ergo the individual student is a principle concern of an institution. It is likely your goals for assessment are not for production value, but rather to determine students' grasp of materials. How can you accurately and equitably assess students' understanding, development, and progress? Fortunately, you do not have to reinvent the wheel. Assessment is a robust field of scholarly (and practical) research. Given the importance of assessment within a university (to students, faculty, and administrators) when was the last time you as an instructor assessed your assessment process, the goals you hold in conducting an assessment, and the efficacy? The Honors Program does not have the answers to how to optimally assess your students' learning or the course

specifically, but we encourage reflection on the process, and hope to help identify resources available at Iowa.

As mentioned in the first chapter, “Why Honors?”, the UI Honors Program hopes that students in honors courses will “engage creatively and more meaningfully with the course content.” Methods by which a student’s understanding and learning are evaluated also provide an opportunity for creative engagement. This assertion is informed by the “Observer Effect” and Strathern’s “Goodhart’s Law.”

*Observer Effect: the act of observing a particle, or a system, disturbs the system and alters the results. I.e. measuring a tire’s air pressure results in some air escaping the tire, lowering the pressure as you measure it; an authority figure observing an evaluation changes the psychological basis upon which a student taking the assessment finds themselves influencing the end result.*

*Goodhart’s Law:When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure. I.e. when knowledge of a specific term becomes a target for understanding in a course, pressure is asserted to teach to the test rather than to student understanding of the goals of a course; if an individual tries to anticipate the effects of a policy, and takes action, that alter its outcome.*

What do physics and economics have to do with education? Well, quite a bit it seems. Regardless of what your syllabus states about course objectives, students are likely to believe the take-aways are the items upon which they were assessed. The status of a question on an assessment is an indicator of that knowledge’s worth, changing the substance of what is measured—The Observer Effect. This can be partially attributed to the principles above, as well as the cultural phenomena of valuing objective assessment over process assessment (Harvey and Williams, 2010). Another danger of

assessment is the dreaded “teaching to the test” whereas students only retain information which is on assessments and faculty focus on these outcomes—Goodhart’s law. Therefore, the methods by which students are assessed **can be just as important as the material disseminated.**

Generally speaking, there are three kinds of assessment in the classroom: assessment of learning, assessment for learning, and assessment as learning. Each of these are distinguishable by the tools used, contexts practiced, and the goals of the assessment. They all have appropriate uses in student assessment, as well as ineffective applications. Foundational terminology is required for future success in major courses, and multiple choice or writing definitions is appropriate (assessment of learning). Multiple choice may become less effective if understanding of an ill-defined topic is what ought to be evaluated. Then it may be more ideal to use writing or a collaborative quiz structure to assess comprehension (assessment for learning). Perhaps you want to use groups projects, presentations, or other methods of constructivist assessment (assessment as learning). We have all struggled in writing the perfect test question, but by keeping your course goals in mind you’ll be able to hit the target if not the mark. Developing assessments can be tiring and thankless work. I know first-hand how demotivating it is to lead a biochemistry review session and have 80% of the participants leave after you announce you don’t know what is on the exam yet. It may not matter that you promise the review focuses on key material and are available to answer questions. Its easy for students to fall for the trap of thinking all that matters is passing an assessment. It is a logical move to invest as little as possible so that other priorities can be supported.

Our students are a diverse bunch, many holding multiple roles such as parent, employee, family caretaker, etc. I argue that this is all the more reason to make course assessments more meaningful, to encourage greater engagement with materials and concepts.

The Iowa Center for Teaching provides many resources on different forms of assessment, rubric creation, literature reviews, and individualized instruction. We encourage you to take advantage of these resources to reinvigorate how you assess your students' learning outcomes.

<https://teach.its.uiowa.edu/resources/collections/assessment>

Please note that the UI Honors Program recognizes that using bell-curve grading (grading over a normal distribution curve) is desired in some settings. However, we **strongly oppose creating separate normal distributions that evaluate honors students separately from non-honors students in the course.** This method of student assessment results in distortion and is a disincentive to honors students enrolling in honors course sections.

### Citations

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## CHAPTER 8.

### CONTENT SAMPLES

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*Syllabi and Assignments from Honors Faculty*

EMILY D. HILL

In this section, you will find a variety of sample syllabi and course assignments from Honors seminars and Honors departmental courses. These examples demonstrate characteristics of what honors education can look like in terms of self-discovery, community building, and experiential learning.

#### **CLSA:2016: Classical Mythology**

In reflecting on her course in terms of how she promotes self-discovery in the classroom, Dr. Deb Trusty said “For Classical Mythology, the honors section differs in one big way: they have an on-going project that takes the entire semester and it replaces the final paper that the rest of the class has to complete. It’s called a mytheme (myth-theme) project...it’s been very successful and allows honors students to engage more with primary sources and research something that interests them.”

Below are her syllabus and honors assignment:

- [Syllabus](#)

- [Honors Paper](#)

**HONR:1630: Honors Seminar Literary Visual & Performing Arts: Harry Potter and the Quest for Enlightenment**

The late Donna Parsons valued giving her honors students choice in regards to the topic of their research projects. She allowed the student to pick a research topic based on their own academic interests and tasked them to write about their topic in relation to what they read in the Harry Potter series. Giving honors students the chance to make research topic choices can nurture their self-authorship in terms of autonomy—hopefully leading to some intellectual risks.

Hear Donna Parsons discuss how she created the course in response to intense student interest and reflect on the ways in which students engaged with course material on a personal and individualized level in this 2015 interview with [Talk of Iowa's Charity Nebbe](#) (Parsons' interview begins at about 14 minutes.).

For further information, please see her syllabus below:

- [Syllabus](#)

**HONR:2600: Honors Special Topics Seminar: High Ability College Students and Wellness**

The development of this course was entirely in response to the growing need of mental health and overall wellness support for high achieving honors students. Students in this seminar are exposed to a variety

of challenges high ability college students face as well as healthy ways to cope.

Throughout the course, students write reflections about how they personally relate to readings and guest presentations and how they think they will use the information in the future. There is also an opportunity for students to pick their own topic pertaining to high ability, mental health, and/or wellness and lead the class through a discussion forum. This gives students the chance to pick topics they feel strongly about and dig deeper into their own self-authorship.

Most importantly, this class simply offers a space for students to meet other students who live with similar challenges. There was ample time given for students to make connections in small group discussions, which lead to deeper relationships of trust and support.

Please see syllabus for more context:

- [Syllabus](#)

### **HONR:2700: Honors Program Fellows Seminar**

In this seminar, Honors Program Fellows are exposed to ways in which they can further their self-discovery in terms of service learning and/or civic engagement. The first major assignment asks the students to explore avenues in which their future careers can serve the community (local, state, national, world) around them. The students look beyond the lens of their day-to-day work tasks to see if there are projects that can move beyond the 40-hour work week and make an impact on a challenge or void in their communities. This small paper requires them to take what they learned in class, do some research on their own, and apply it to their own

professional goals. What most students discover is that there is so much more they can do with their future careers to make a positive impact in the world.

Lastly, the semester culminates in a group project where the students need to work together to apply for a fictional community impact grant. The students research the needs in Iowa City and decide what areas need significant improvement (examples include: community garden development in local food deserts, free taxi service for New Americans who need transportation to job interviews, affordable housing units in Downtown Iowa City). While the students are researching, writing, and designing their impact grant campaigns, significant community building within the classroom occurs. The students lean on each others' talents and skills and navigate problem solving.

For further reading, please see the course syllabus and assignments below:

- [Syllabus](#)
- [Small Paper](#)
- [Grant Proposal Project](#)

### **SPST:1074 Inequality in American Sport**

Dr. Jennifer Sterling provided background and overview of how she adjusted her Inequality in American Sport course to an honors section. She wrote,

Inequality in American Sport is a 220-person cross-listed introductory lecture course that fulfills the Diversity and Inclusion General Education requirement for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The course also fulfills a foundation requirement for the Sport Studies undergraduate major. The course is taught in a lecture/

discussion format with nine discussion sections taught by 3 graduate Teaching Assistants from American Studies. The honors section (A03) of the course is capped at 20-students (rather than 25), is taught by an experienced TA (usually the Lead TA) who has taught course sections previously, and is supervised by the course instructor.

The honors section curriculum closely follows the course curriculum and utilizes the same syllabus as the rest of the course (see attached example from Spring 2021). Honors students are expected to engage with the majority of course requirements (e.g. lectures, readings, topic reflections, and the course's final diversity dialogue assignment) in much the same way as the rest of the class. However, additional opportunities for independent and individualized learning and experiential, service, and community engaged learning **extend the breadth, depth, and complexity** of course content and objectives for honors students. These opportunities are available primarily through course roundtable requirements and discussion section participation.

- Roundtable attendance and reflections are a course requirement at the culmination of each of the course's two major modules – the first focused on gender, sexuality, and ability and the second focused on race, ethnicity and religion (see assignment descriptions below). Honors students select one of approx. 6 roundtable topics (approx. 3 from each module) to assist in developing supporting resources and questions to pose to roundtable participants, and participate in roundtable moderation. Following the roundtable students have the opportunity for further interaction with roundtable participants (e.g. see below for a list of roundtable participants from Spring 2021). Our roundtable participants represent a variety of campus, community, and external (state, national, or international) scholars and organizations. Thus, honors students have additional opportunities to interact with local and national resources relevant to future **experiential**

**learning opportunities** required as part of the honors curriculum (e.g. research, service learning, internships).

- Discussion sections are utilized to connect weekly lecture and reading content to personal experiences and to extend weekly content through its application to specific examples and current events. To assist in preparation for their selected roundtable honors students help lead discussion topics related to their roundtable topic. While similar content is engaged with in honors sections, pedagogical approaches are adjusted to add breadth, depth, and/or complexity to honors section curriculum.

The honors section curriculum for SPST 1074 Inequality in American Sport has evolved, and will continue to evolve, in direct relation to student feedback and the course's teaching assistants assigned to the honors section. The course's honors student cohorts have been active and engaged learners, have offered insightful feedback, and have been integral to future course design and implementation. The course's honors curriculum was initially more research-focused and has since transitioned to promote community-engaged learning as the course's and students' focus on diversity and inclusion has shifted to proactive rather than reactive responses to contemporary DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) issues in American sport. Future honors curriculum plans involve potential opportunities for experiential coursework credit and/or teaching/learning assistantships.

For further reading, please see the course syllabus below:

- [Syllabus](#)

### **Sample Honors Syllabi from Other Higher Education Institutions:**

The link below will lead readers to a selection of

honors syllabi across a variety of academic disciplines from other universities and colleges. The wide range of topics and pedagogical approaches demonstrate how experimental and creative the honors classroom can be.

- <https://nchc.site-ym.com/page/samplesyllabi>

## CHAPTER 9.

# MID-SEMESTER COURSE ASSESSMENT TOOLS

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*Instructor self-assessment and student check-in*

ADDISON WOLL

Checking the pulse of your honors course section mid way through the semester is a technique which can be of benefit to both you the instructor and your class. This check-in permits you to determine how the class is responding to materials, the pace of the course, and if the method of instruction is having maximum perceived impact using the students' own words instead of relying solely on quantitative data from assignments. This mid semester survey also provides students with insight into goals of the course, teaching styles, and actionable items. This also aligns with the work of the ACE Task Force at Iowa. See "Formative Assessment Strategies" for more information on <https://ace.uiowa.edu/>

According to the University of Texas at Austin Center for Faculty Innovation<sup>1</sup>, things you should consider in your survey are:

1. <https://facultyinnovate.utexas.edu/mid-semester-feedback>

- When is the best time to collect this feedback?
  - A good time to collect this feedback is after the first major exam or unit break, but still early enough to be able to make adjustments if necessary (usually 4-8 weeks into the semester).
- How many students are in your class?
  - For large-enrollment courses, consider using closed-ended questions with very few open-ended questions.
  - For courses with a fewer than 100 students, consider using a mixture of open-ended and closed-ended questions.
- What resources do you have for evaluating results?
  - If you have TAs or other support, consider including more open-ended questions.
  - If you are doing this alone, then the size of your class becomes a major factor.
- What are you most interested in learning about from the feedback collected:
  - Discovering what instructional strategies or course policies are and are not working well to support student learning?
  - Determining how well specific changes made to the course are working?
  - Identifying patterns of student learning behavior that are working better than others?
- What's the best format for collecting the feedback?
  - [\[ICON\]](#) allows you to award students points for completing an anonymous survey if you would like to incentivize student participation.
  - Qualtrics is a powerful survey tool with a wide variety of question types and helpful

reports.

- Sometimes a live discussion might seem like the most fitting setting for hearing from students. Consider letting an outside colleague (another grad student that's not your TA or a fellow faculty member) facilitate a feedback session with your students while you step out of the room. This informal focus group approach can provide additional insights beyond individual surveys.
  - The Office of Teaching, Learning & Technology provides a specific service on this: <https://teach.its.uiowa.edu/class-assessment-student-interview-classi>

At the end of this chapter the University Honors Program will provide a sample mid-semester check-in survey.

It is important to note that if you do survey your class with a mid-semester check-in it is crucial to share the results with your class. This not only assures student buy-into the process but also empowers students to maximize their investment in the course. Sharing the results, or key themes/findings, is also an opportunity for you to share with the students any changes you plan to make, or to clarify any policies or course elements that may have caused frustration or confusion.

For this mid-semester survey process, the Honors Program recommends:

1. Creation of a feedback form specific to the needs of your class
2. Discussion of the purpose and scope of the survey with your class

3. Assess teaching and learning goals with open ended questions which
  1. This will provide more meaningful responses than close-ended questions
  2. Only ask questions that you are prepared to respond to in a non-defensive manner
4. Reflect upon your own teaching in light of student responses
5. Respond to feedback in a transparent manner with your students

You may be interested in [facilitating feedback throughout your course](#), not just after the mid-term.

[Qualtrics Template](#)

[Template\\_Mid-Semester\\_Checkin](#)

[Design your Own](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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EMILY D. HILL; HOLLY YODER; AND ADDISON WOLL

### EMILY HILL, PHD

#### **Interim Director**

Emily Hill joined the University Honors Program in April 2019 as Assistant Director. She works on enhancing and supporting educational experiences for honors students through curriculum, experiential learning, academic advisement, and community development. Her research addresses twice-exceptional college students (gifted college students living with mental health issues) and how universities can better support these individuals through staff, faculty, advisement, and programming.

#### **Education:**

- University of North Dakota, PhD in Educational Foundations and Research, 2020
- University of North Dakota, Master of Arts in English, 2011

- University of North Dakota, Bachelor of Arts in English and Honors, 2008

## **ADDISON WOLL**

### **Assessment Manager & Admissions Coordinator**

Addison joined the University Honors Program in February 2020. as the assessment manager and admissions coordinator. He oversees student program progress requirements, enrollment records, tracks program methods to improve student success outcomes, and strives to support communities of care. His interest areas include supporting student success outcomes, retention in higher education, specifically in traditionally underserved populations, and how universities can achieve their mandates to serve students and the state. Addison further serves the University as a First-Generation student advocate, a Safe Zone designee, secretary for the UI-LGBTQ+ Staff&Faculty Council, and UI-Institutional Review Board 2 voting member.

#### **Education:**

- University of Iowa, M.A. in Educational Policy and Leadership Studies, 2020
- University of Iowa, M.S. in Molecular Medicine, 2017
- Southeast Missouri State University, B.S. in Biochemistry, Microbiology, and Honors, 2014

## HOLLY BLOSSER YODER

### Advising Director

Holly joined the Honors Program in 2009 upon completing a masters in Student Development in Higher Education at the University of Iowa. As Honors Advising Director, she relates to multiple student groups. She supervises the Honors Peer Advisors, Outreach Ambassadors, and the student editors and writers who produce Honors Publications. She also advises Phi Eta Sigma Honor Society. A writer with an interest in history and culture, Holly is the author of *The Same Spirit: History of Iowa-Nebraska Mennonites*. She has lived and worked abroad in Zambia, Lesotho, and Ethiopia.

#### **Education:**

- University of Iowa, M.A. in Student Development in Post-Secondary Education, 2009
- Eastern Mennonite University, B.A. in Modern Languages, 1985