

What Makes an Honors Course an Honors Course?

There are many approaches to developing and teaching honors courses. Fundamentally, however, honors courses should be **qualitatively different** than non-honors courses. In other words, they should be more challenging and demanding not by simply assigning **more** work, but by mining more educational **value** from the work that is assigned.

When the Clemson University Honors College Committee considers a proposal for a new honors course, it wants to see concrete evidence on the Sample Syllabus accompanying the Course Approval Form that the course will be different in some, but not necessarily all, of the following ways:

- approaching the material from an interesting or unconventional thematic perspective;
- emphasizing written and oral communication skills;
- emphasizing discussion and other interactive teaching/learning techniques that are generally unsuitable for larger undergraduate classes;
- promoting learning outside the formal classroom setting (e.g., service projects);
- fostering teamwork and collaboration;
- applying principles learned in class to “real-life” problems and situations;
- exploring connections among various fields of study;
- providing opportunities for independent research;
- providing opportunities for publication or public presentation of work;
- developing assignments and exercises that require students to reconcile conflicting findings or to synthesize different points of view;
- emphasizing the use of original or primary sources, as opposed to traditional textbooks and secondary readings

N.B. The innovative elements that distinguish the honors course pedagogy and learning objectives should also be incorporated into the grading scheme indicated in the Evaluation section of the Sample Syllabus.

For further guidance in designing honors courses, see “How to Tell an Honors Student When You See One” (below). For information about Honors College policies and requirements, please call our office (656-4762) or visit our website: <http://www.clemson.edu/cuhonors>.

How to Tell an Honors Student When You See One

For the vast majority of faculty, teaching honors students is a positive, battery-recharging experience. However, every once in awhile the Honors Office gets a phone call that goes something like this: "Where in the #\$*%! did you find these honors students? I can't get them to do anything! They come to class unprepared, and all they care about is grades. When I walk into my regular class and say 'Good morning,' the students say 'Good morning' back to me. When I go into my honors class and say 'Good morning,' they write it down in their notes and ask if it will be on the exam."

The occasional frustration in teaching honors students may arise from false expectations about their talents and capabilities. In the interest of sorting out the real from the ideal, we offer some general observations of honors students you might want to keep in mind when designing honors courses. Keep in mind that honors students are a diverse lot; these remarks are not intended as stereotypes.

1. Honors students are bright and are more academically motivated than non-honors students, but they are not necessarily more mature or better disciplined. In fact, because academic success has come easily to most of them, they often have poor study habits.
2. While it's reasonable to expect honors students to grasp new concepts more quickly than other students, you shouldn't assume they are faster readers. Some evidence suggests they are actually slower readers because they read more carefully -- or at least think they do.
3. It helps to be reminded that honors students are undergraduates not far removed from high school. You're likely to be disappointed if your expectations of honors students are the same as those of graduate students.
4. Most honors students are intellectually adventuresome, but many are cautious navigators of academic waters who crave "structure" and knowing where they stand grade-wise. They like assignments to be carefully spelled out and spend a lot of time figuring out exactly what the instructor wants.
5. Many honors students, being academically multi-talented, should respond favorably to interdisciplinary and other innovative teaching methods. Others, having excelled within the narrow confines of their "comfort zones," may need some prodding to appreciate how the "other side" thinks and to adjust to ways of learning different from those they are used to.
6. Most honors students are inexperienced in academic difficulty. If they have trouble in your course, they may be too embarrassed to admit it and to ask you for help. We always urge students to discuss their problems with the instructor, but often that advice falls on deaf ears. To bridge the communication gap you may need to take the lead.
7. If your course features group projects, don't be surprised have to undertake some effort to teach the value of teamwork. Many honors students shy away from group exercises where "mistakes" run a high risk of exposure, and other team members may not be trusted to do the job right.

- 8.** Honors students have a lot at stake and are under a great deal of pressure to succeed. To remain in Honors they must keep a 3.40 GPR. Most have scholarships linked to academic performance, and the majority have some type of post-graduate education in their plans. If you find your honors students are maddeningly grade-conscious, be patient and try to understand that it's partly because they have to be.
- 9.** While the essence of an honors course is not the amount of work required, this does not mean that honors courses should be easy. We stress to honors students that they will have to work for what they get, and that they should not expect A's just because they are members of the Clemson University Honors College. We trust you will underscore this point by making sure your course is appropriately challenging.
- 10.** A final comment about grades.... If nothing else, Honors is about excellence. Therefore, it is strongly recommend that final course grades be assigned according to absolute standards, not on the basis of a "curve." If all the students satisfy the normal criteria for "excellent" work, they should all receive A's. Similarly, if none do excellent work, none should get A's just because they are the best of a less than excellent bunch.