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## Contracting in Honors

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KAMBRA BOLCH

# Contracting in Honors

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TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

A survey of the second edition of *Peterson's Honors Programs*<sup>1</sup> reveals that a variety of honors programs and colleges around the country employ the honors contract as one mechanism whereby students may earn honors course credit. Although there is no uniform definition of what a contract entails, one common approach is the completion of a paper, project, or other assignment in addition to a non-honors course's requirements. Of the 360 listings in the *Peterson's* guide, at least 43 public, private, two-year, and four-year programs and colleges choose to mention contracting in their listings. Contracting, therefore, appears to provide a prominent and much-needed solution to the ever-present problem of providing sufficient opportunities for students to earn their required honors course credits. In smaller honors programs, for example, contracting may provide one of the primary opportunities for completing honors requirements. In larger programs, contracting may enable participation in honors from students in academic disciplines in which few stand-alone honors courses are offered. Whatever the size or budget of the honors program, it is clear that contracting remains a staple in the honors experience for many students. But the question remains: Does contracting really measure up to the expectations of the honors experience? That question has been debated at Texas Tech University, and, as with any good debate, there are multiple perspectives, each with compelling arguments and evidence in the form of student, faculty, and administrator experiences with contracts. This article outlines the problems with contracting that developed over several years at Texas Tech University, comments on the process by which solutions were identified, and presents the solutions that were created.

## GROWTH IN THE TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY CONTRACTING PROCESS

Increasing use of the contracting procedure was directly tied to the rapid growth of the TTU Honors Program from approximately 500 students in the late

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<sup>1</sup> *Peterson's Honors Programs*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Princeton, NJ: Thomson publishing, 1999.

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1990's to more than 1,000 in 2003.<sup>2</sup> Despite a significant growth in the college's resources and a corresponding increase in its ability to offer stand-alone honors courses, a number of students, particularly in the engineering and science disciplines, still had difficulty completing the required 24 hours of honors coursework to earn an Honors College designation on their diploma. Students in other majors with very structured curricula—architecture and interior design, among others—also struggled to complete the requirements. The difficulties imposed by structured curricula were compounded in many cases by significant numbers of college credits earned through dual-credit (simultaneous high school/college enrollment), CLEP, and AP work; these credits typically fulfilled university general education requirements, thus discouraging students from taking honors courses which fulfilled those requirements. For many of these students, the only feasible way to complete the honors designation was to pursue contracts, typically in their major courses. As the number of these students increased with the college's growing enrollment, the number of contracts increased. In the 1998-1999 academic year, 77 contracts were completed. In the next two academic years, 96 and 95 contracts were completed, respectively. And by 2001-2002, 108 contracts were completed.<sup>3</sup>

In the first years of college status, the increase in the use of the contracting process seemed to yield only minimal growing pains. The primary problem stemmed from lack of communication, with several disagreements between students and faculty members arising at the end of the contracting process as to whether the student had indeed completed the contract terms. Simple modifications of the Honors College contracting form to require more specificity about the proposed projects (e.g., length of papers or other written work, number and types of sources to be used, expectations for presentation) reduced those problems. When contracting forms lacking clarity or specificity were submitted, an Honors College staff member would contact the professor to suggest

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<sup>2</sup> The waning TTU program, in existence since 1959 but without sufficient university support, was revitalized in 1993 when the program had only a handful of identifiable Honors Program students. Interested in attracting better students, the university's leadership committed new resources to hire a full-time director and allocated other necessary resources to the program's support. These actions quickly yielded a healthy population of Honors Program students. The University formally authorized college status for the program in 1998, when the newly converted Honors College had more than 500 students. The Honors College continued to grow both in numbers and in offerings. By the beginning of the fall 2003 semester the Honors College saw its highest ever enrollment of 1,015 students (pre-20<sup>th</sup>-class-day enrollment was 1,015, and post-20<sup>th</sup>-class-day enrollment was 917).

<sup>3</sup> A healthy number of stand-alone Honors courses were offered each year that contracting grew. In 1998-1999, there were 82 stand-alone Honors courses offered in the fall and 78 offered in the spring. In 1999-2000, there were 93 fall courses and 90 spring courses; in 2000-2001, there were 86 fall courses and 91 spring courses; and in 2001-2002, there were 88 fall courses and 82 spring courses.

(tactfully) that clarifying expectations might prove helpful to ensure a positive outcome for both participants. This approach was generally well received by faculty. With the modification of the form and, if necessary, a quick conversation with a faculty member drawing upon lessons learned from contracting disagreements, some contracting wrinkles were smoothed.

But while many contracts were completed, several situations raised concerns about the quality and integrity of the contracting process. The first concern stemmed from the seemingly ubiquitous approach by the vast majority of faculty entering into a contract of assigning an additional paper. Anecdotal but consistent feedback from students indicated that either they perceived these extra papers negatively, as something of a nuisance or hurdle, or neutrally, as identical to writing any other paper. These perceptions seemed at odds with recruiting literature statements that the Honors College experience offered an "enriched" learning experience that was "different" rather than simply "harder." Another concern developed over an apparent pattern of students and faculty to delay work on pending contracts until the last days of a semester. The negative effects of procrastination were amplified when a paper was the contract requirement since papers generally required little contact between the student and faculty member, a situation that seemed antithetical to the expectations of an honors experience. Concerns also arose on several occasions when faculty from the same discipline and teaching the same course offered vastly different contracting options to their respective students.

Although these issues drew some attention from Honors College administrators, several serious incidents served to raise the level of concern significantly. In one particularly troubling situation, a faculty member certified that the student had completed the contract terms as agreed, but it later became clear—from the student's own admission—that the student had not completed *any* of the contract provisions.<sup>4</sup> Although less blatant, a few other questionable instances occurred in which faculty members indicated that students had completed the terms of a contract. In these other cases, it appeared that faculty who felt guilty about falling short in the mentoring role may have been motivated to "help the student" by accepting less than what was originally agreed. After these few incidents, the college began to require that a copy of the tangible work be submitted at the end of the contract. But this new requirement had thorns of its own when, in another disturbing incident, a faculty member approved a student's contract work but the Honors College

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<sup>4</sup> The faculty member told the student that the class was difficult enough already and, as such, should count as "honors." Interestingly, the faculty member had the student doing fund-raising work for the department in the time she would have been working on the contract. This particular situation may illustrate the attitude of a particular unit on campus toward honors work as unnecessary for its students. Anecdotal information from various Honors College students within the discipline indicates that students are advised overtly that participation in the honors experience is unnecessary because a student's GPA is the only important factor considered by potential employers.

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administrator finalizing the contract's completion recognized easily that the student's work was almost wholly plagiarized.<sup>5</sup> The combination of these incidents caused Honors College staff and administrators to question whether students were profiting fully from the contracting experience, especially since it had been held out as providing an opportunity for a student to develop the kind of close working relationship with a faculty member that would reveal particular insights into the scholarship of a discipline. Ultimately, the issues triggered a dialogue within the Honors College regarding the direction in which contracting should go.

### THE OPENING DISCUSSIONS

The first discussions took place in the fall of 2002 among Honors College staff and administration following discovery of the problems outlined above. Eliminating contracting altogether did not seem to be an appropriate option given the difficulties some students had in completing their Honors College requirements and the positive experiences some contracts provided for students and faculty. Both staff and administrators agreed that there were problems with contracting, but it quickly became apparent that the role of faculty autonomy would have to be considered. While the axiom that faculty members are solely responsible for assigning course grades holds true on the Texas Tech campus, the contracting process had been structured from the outset as one in which the Honors organization (first as Program, then as College) certified to the university's registrar that a successfully contracted course should be designated for "Honors Credit" on a student's transcript. Thus, while the faculty member assigned the grade for the course based on requirements unrelated to the contract, the Honors College was responsible for placing what amounted to the college's "seal of approval" on each contract experience through the additional transcript notation once it received the faculty member's certification that the elements of the contract were completed.<sup>6</sup>

While the fledgling Honors Program of the early and mid-1990's—with all but nonexistent administrative support and very few contracts—reasonably approached the contracting process as a strictly clerical one (*i.e.*, students

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<sup>5</sup> An Honors College administrator met with the student to discuss the contracted work, and the student admitted that the material found on the Internet and the work submitted for the contract were almost identical and that the written work was without proper citation. The class was a communications studies class in which the material also was presented orally, and the student stated that she was unaware that she needed to cite her sources in the written work. In an effort to provide an educational opportunity, the Honors College administrator offered the student the chance to rewrite the written portion of the contract. The student declined and later withdrew from the Honors College.

<sup>6</sup> The TTU Honors College requires that a student earn a grade of "A" or "B" to receive honors credit.

brought in a one-page form indicating that they were contracting and faculty simply reported “yea” or “nay” to the Honors Program at the end of the process), the more fully developed and complex Honors College of the late 1990’s needed to ensure appropriate standards. Whether individual faculty members should be solely responsible for determining if a contract was successfully completed—and thus should earn an Honors College transcript notation—was a non-issue, at least for most cases. But what of the few troubling cases that had arisen, namely academic dishonesty and outright falsification that the terms of a contract had been completed? The almost sacrosanct principle of a faculty member’s complete autonomy within his or her class seemed to clash with the equally inviolable notion that a student’s transcript—the permanent academic record—must embody complete integrity. The contracting issues that had accumulated, especially the conflicting and crucial principles of faculty autonomy and academic integrity, were so important that an *ad hoc* committee of six faculty and three Honors College staff and administrators was called together in March 2003 to discuss the contracting process.

## THE COMMITTEE DISCUSSION

The *ad hoc* committee’s six faculty members represented a range of disciplines from the humanities to engineering to human sciences. Some had been associated with the Honors organization consistently from the 1970’s and 1980’s while others had only recently become involved with the college through contracting and had never taught a stand-alone honors course. Those Honors College personnel who had begun the initial discussion about contracting—the Dean, Associate Dean, and Program Coordinator, the staff member primarily responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the contracting process—also took part in the discussion. The *ad hoc* committee members were informed of the nature of the problems that had arisen in preparation for the meeting.

The discussion among the members of the *ad hoc* committee only served to underscore the tension between the principle of faculty autonomy and the problem of inaccurate certification of work on a transcript, with some members’ opinions corresponding to the idea that an experience such as a contract that is attached to a faculty member’s course rests solely within the faculty member’s purview, and other members’ opinions indicating that known cases of fraud or dishonesty should not be certified for Honors College credit even if a faculty member had approved the work. In the end, no one argued that fraud or dishonesty should be accepted for contract credit, but reluctance among several committee members about encroaching on faculty autonomy precluded the possibility of a clear statement or policy about how such situations would be handled. Because the opinions were deeply held and, it appeared from the intensity of the debates, unlikely to change, discussion was steered toward methods of preventing problems before they began.

## AD HOC COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The discussions of the *ad hoc* committee members yielded a number of excellent recommendations which are outlined in this section. Those that have been implemented are evaluated in the section entitled “Solutions.” Others, while good ideas, were not put into practice for a variety of reasons also outlined in that section.

Perhaps the most central element of the *ad hoc* committee’s discussion was the idea that more detailed instructions and information for contracting be developed. While a “Faculty Guide to Teaching and Creating Honors Courses” existed, no similar publication had been created for faculty who contracted. Because many of the faculty who contracted were in disciplinary areas in which few stand-alone Honors College courses existed, there was little knowledge about an honors academic experience in those departments. The *ad hoc* committee members suggested developing a more comprehensive set of guidelines, including the basic expectations of the honors experience and specific expectations for contracting, including that two of the primary purposes of contracting are to enable a student and faculty member to establish a one-to-one, ongoing mentor-mentee relationship throughout the semester and to enable the student to experience the subject matter in more depth.

Because several *ad hoc* committee members disclosed situations in which they felt that students, especially graduating seniors, who had not performed as well as expected had pressured them to certify the fulfillment of their Honors College requirements, they suggested that faculty be advised clearly on the form that they were free both to decline to contract with a student and to deny honors credit at the end of the process if the terms of the contract were not fulfilled. In addition, while some committee members felt that expectations of complete integrity in the work submitted for contract credit should be obvious, others felt that the lack of awareness on the part of today’s students regarding plagiarism warranted a specific statement on the contracting form—and that such a statement could prompt faculty members to be more mindful of and vigilant about academic integrity.

Several of the *ad hoc* committee members who had experienced both positive and negative contracting experiences offered to be available to discuss contracting with other faculty members new to the process. This suggestion further evolved into the idea that a list be developed of all faculty members experienced with contracting. The list could be made available to newcomers to the contracting process to foster communication, especially between those in the same discipline. Continued discussion also yielded an offshoot of this idea, to catalog examples of excellent contracting experiences, including the tangible products of those contracts. The committee members thought that making information readily available about the range of possible contracting projects would inspire faculty members to create options more creative—and perhaps more enriching—than the much-relied-upon extra paper.

A more controversial idea for enhancing communication about contracting also emerged during discussions. Some of the *ad hoc* committee members

suggested that information about contracting could be better conveyed through a mandatory faculty orientation process. The committee discussed both the possibility that the orientation be required for any faculty member new to contracting and the possibility that the orientation be optional. Some *ad hoc* committee members suggested that many faculty would be unwilling to participate in a required orientation and perhaps even resentful. Other committee members suggested that anyone running an optional orientation would find that he or she would be “preaching to the choir” and that those faculty who would benefit the most from such a session would not attend an optional one.

The wide-ranging committee discussion offered the Honors College administration important insights into the faculty experience with the contracting process. These insights, coupled with student feedback and administrative realities, helped put in place several useful changes in the contracting process.

## SOLUTIONS

The primary way in which the contracting process has changed on the Texas Tech campus is through the dissemination of more detailed instructions for faculty members and students. As the *ad hoc* committee suggested, the standard contracting form has been modified, and a new information sheet has been created outlining the specific expectations of the contracting process and the responsibilities of the student and the faculty member. The information sheet emphasizes three components of the additional work required for the contract: 1) that the student complete a substantial paper or project (15-20 page research paper or a project of equivalent time/effort); 2) that the student share the knowledge/skills/experiences gained through the paper or project with an audience of some sort; and 3) that the faculty member and student have regular contact outside of class to discuss the student’s progress and answer questions regarding the paper or project. Research papers are accepted when the second and third elements are fulfilled since the student is likely to develop the kind of close working relationship with the mentoring faculty member necessary to provide insight into the discipline. The student is required to state specifically on the contract form how he or she will meet each of the three requirements. At the midpoint of the semester, the faculty member is asked to provide a brief report on the contact he or she has had with the student and to assess the student’s progress to date.<sup>7</sup>

Although some of the *ad hoc* committee members suggested that the contracting form specify that a faculty member could decline to contract with a student, the solution adopted to address the concern is to have a single Honors

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<sup>7</sup> This mid-point evaluation enables the staff member to assist a student who may be lagging behind in requirements. The vast majority of students meet deadlines and expectations, but repeated tardiness or failure to complete requirements can mean the end of a contract. The failure to complete a contract does not carry a penalty, and, while there are pros and cons to this approach, thus far the “no penalty” model appears to be an appropriate match for the College’s needs.

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College staff member handle contracts and meet with each student interested in contracting before the student makes contact with a prospective faculty mentor. The contract form itself is no longer available outside such a meeting. This new process seems to facilitate communication because a student has more knowledge of what he or she should be asking of a faculty member before any discussions begin—and before any particular commitments are made.

The appointment of one staff member to handle all contracts has addressed other *ad hoc* committee recommendations as well. Rather than develop a list of faculty who have mentored successful contracts, the staff member handling contracts can brainstorm with students about their interests and refer them to faculty members who are willing and able to serve as mentors. This strategy eliminates the political issues associated with a list of “successful” contract mentors, but it requires that the Honors College staff member become familiar with faculty across campus and seek out new faculty members willing and able to contract. Because the Honors College began requiring a copy of the final work product of each contract as mentioned in the section entitled “The Texas Tech University Contracting Process,” it has been relatively easy to catalog examples of outstanding contracts as the committee recommended.

Some of the *ad hoc* committee members also suggested that the contracting form contain a statement regarding the expectation of complete integrity in the contracted work. This has not been implemented because it was thought that the main problem underlying academic dishonesty in contracts was related primarily to procrastination; students waiting too long to begin a project might be tempted to take shortcuts such as cutting and pasting from online sources. Although significant amounts of academic dishonesty are not apparent, a fall 2004 example of almost wholesale plagiarism on a contract suggests that more must be done to combat the problem, so a specific statement may be added to the contracting materials.<sup>8</sup>

The most controversial suggestion, the implementation of a mandatory faculty orientation process, has not been implemented on the TTU campus. Although this remains an option, there is still a concern for some about whether this would be perceived as encroaching on faculty autonomy. There does not seem to be a pressing need for such an orientation, however, as the number of contracts has declined to 62 for the 2004-2005 academic year. Although there have been a few notable exceptions such as the fall 2004 plagiarism incident,

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<sup>8</sup> This distressing case actually involved two incidents of plagiarism. The faculty member contracting with the student in fall 2004 realized that the student’s work was almost entirely plagiarized and forwarded the paper and Internet source material to the Honors College. In looking at the student’s file, the Honors administrator preparing to meet with the student about the situation discovered that a previous paper submitted for contract credit was also plagiarized. The student admitted that both papers were plagiarized, and honors credit was removed from the student’s transcript for the previous work. No honors credit was given for the second plagiarized paper, and the student was removed from the Honors College.

problems are now rare. And two options for students to earn (or waive) upper-division honors credit have been created as well: taking a graduate class (which almost always requires the kind of close faculty-student contact envisioned for contracting) and completing a study abroad waiver (which requires completion during the semester abroad of an individual, reflective project tied to the entire experience abroad rather than to an individual course).<sup>9</sup> These new options have lessened students' dependence on contracting as the way to earn honors credit in highly structured curricula.

Finally, the problems that began the discussion within the college about contracting also led to a concerted effort in advising to help students plan early and specifically how to complete their honors credits. This special effort in advising has virtually eliminated contracting in the semester of graduation and has therefore decreased the incidences in which faculty feel pressured to certify work that does not meet expectations. With these modifications, the contracting process remains a viable and appropriate option for Texas Tech Honors College students.

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<sup>9</sup> The *Honors Student Handbook* states:

Upper-Level Honors Credit Substitutions

If students are unable to earn upper-level Honors credit by taking 3000 or 4000-level Honors courses, one or two of the following substitution methods may be used for up to 6 hours of upper-level Honors credit. No more than six hours total of upper-level Honors credit may be allowed by substitution, whether by contracting, by graduate courses, or by study-abroad waiver. A student interested in any substitution method should speak to an Honors advisor beforehand.

- Contracting For Honors Credit
- Graduate Courses For Honors Credit  
Honors credit is available to undergraduate students enrolled in graduate courses (5000 & 6000-level). See an Honors advisor for specific details.
- Study Abroad Waiver  
A waiver for some required Honors hours may be available to undergraduate students who study abroad with a non-Honors related study abroad program. This process requires formal and prior approval, as well as the completion of additional written projects and requirements. Through this process, students may earn a waiver for up to 3 hours of upper-level Honors credit for a full summer (June - August), fall, or spring semester abroad. Students who study for 2 semesters abroad (full summer, fall, or spring) may earn a waiver for up to 6 hours of upper-level Honors credit. Honors seminars may not be waived. For specific details, see an Honors advisor.

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### APPENDICES

#### HONORS CONTRACTING

##### (Information for students and professors – keep for your records)

Honors contracting is a means to help Honors College students who have difficulty finding upper-division Honors courses that fit well with their major(s). Contracting allows an Honors student to receive Honors credit for a non-Honors course by completing work above and beyond what is required of students in the course. Honors contracting is one of four ways students may substitute for upper-division Honors credit. The other methods are: study abroad waiver, graduate courses, and graduate-level work in cross-listed courses. **Students may only substitute up to two upper-division Honors courses** using any combination of these four substitution methods. Only 3000 and 4000-level courses that meet face to face are eligible to be contracted. No independent study or research hours may be contracted.

To receive Honors credit for a contracted course, a student must receive a grade of (B-) or better in the course and satisfactorily complete work in addition to what is already required in the course. There are 3 essential components of this additional work. These elements are:

1. a substantial paper or project (15-20 page research paper OR a project of equivalent time/effort)
2. sharing the knowledge/skills/experiences gained through part 1 with some audience
3. regular contact with the faculty member outside of class to discuss the student's progress and answer questions regarding the paper/project

An important part of Honors contracting is regular contact (outside of class) with the professor. The student should meet regularly with the professor outside of class to ask questions and receive guidance on the paper/project. However, we urge the student not to burden the professor. Examples of this would include: asking the professor to bear the entire responsibility for developing a paper/project idea for the student's Honors Contract, photocopying things for the student, editing something for the student which the student has not proof-read, or asking the professor to mail the Contracting Final Checkout Form to the Honors College at the semester's end. These tasks are the student's responsibility. The professor's role is to: help guide the student as he/she develops a paper/project idea, answer questions and provide feedback on the student's work, and at the end of the semester, determine whether the student satisfactorily completed each component of the contract.

Attached to these instructions is the contracting application. The student should indicate how he/she will satisfy the three essential elements of contracting (listed above) before submitting the application to the professor for a

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final signature. Students must attach a syllabus for the course to the application. The Honors College makes the final determination regarding the contract application's acceptance. Students should not begin working on their paper/project until the Honors College has approved the contract application. **Contract applications must be submitted to the Honors College within the first 10 school days of the semester to be considered.** Students can expect to hear about the status of their application within 10 days after it has been submitted.

Students' projects need to relate (in some way) to the material covered in the course itself. One way to do this would be to use the course textbook as a significant source if writing a paper. **Any tangible product(s) created during your contracting experience (e.g., research paper, a Power Point presentation saved to a disk, a journal, poster, reflective paper, artwork, mechanical device, etc.) will need to be turned into the Honors Office by the last day of classes for the semester in which you contract. Accompanying the tangible products should be a signed Contracting Final Checkout Form.**

If, during the semester, the student decides he/she is not interested in seeing the contract through to its completion, the student may cancel the contract. This will not affect the student's status in the Honors College or his/her standing in the course. The student will simply not receive Honors credit for that course.

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**HONORS COLLEGE CONTRACT APPLICATION**

**NOTE: This form must be completed and returned to the Honors College within the first ten class days of the semester in which you intend to contract. You must attach a syllabus to this application for the course you are contracting.**

Student Name (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Local Address (city, state, zip) \_\_\_\_\_

SS# \_\_\_\_\_ TTU E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Phone# \_\_\_\_\_ Course Number and Section \_\_\_\_\_

Semester in which you are contracting \_\_\_\_\_

Student's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Professor's name (please print) \_\_\_\_\_ Dept. \_\_\_\_\_

Department Mail Stop \_\_\_\_\_ Professor's E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Professor's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

On the following sheet, please indicate how you plan to satisfy the three components of contracting. These three components are **IN ADDITION** to all other coursework required of the students in the class. **Be very detailed and specific** in describing how you plan to accomplish these three components, as this will provide your professor very clear criteria with which to evaluate you at the end of the semester.

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY			
APPROVED by Honors College Dean (or representative)			
Date completed:	SH:1	Grade:	Project rec'd:
Honors credit earned?	SS Entry:	Registrar notified:	

Component 1 – A substantial paper or project (15-20 page research paper OR a project of equivalent time/effort)

Component 2 – Sharing the knowledge/skills/experiences gained through part 1 with some audience

Component 3 – Regular contact with faculty member outside of class to discuss student's progress and answer questions regarding the paper/project

