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ALEXANDER WERTH

On The Benefits of Teaching Honors

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Honors colleges and programs vary widely by institution, naturally, but the main feature they share is involvement by top students of superior ability and motivation. Typically honors courses also involve top teachers—those who are most skilled, conscientious, and passionate about teaching. This applies whether honors teachers are self-selected, nominated by peers, or chosen by an honors director or coordinator.

Without a doubt the most satisfying experiences of my career have come through my work as a college honors instructor, leading classes of extraordinarily enthusiastic and gifted students. Without a doubt the most frustrating experiences have come through my work as an honors program director, cajoling my colleagues to consider teaching an honors course. Both situations—teaching varied honors courses to freshmen and upperclassmen, as well as recruiting honors faculty—have helped me to answer the ubiquitous question raised by my colleagues: “Why should I teach honors? What’s in it for me?”

How can you persuade faculty colleagues to design and implement an ongoing or one-time honors course? How can you convince a department or program chair, a dean, or a vice president that certain professors should be asked or allowed to participate, perhaps by being freed from other teaching duties and obligations? It may help to polish your sales (and begging) skills, but the purpose of this brief piece, aimed especially at novice honors administrators, is to report, in practical terms, several of the most likely and most obvious principal benefits of teaching honors.

The benefits of teaching honors are numerous and indisputable. They fall into three general categories. This essay will focus primarily on benefits to the instructor, but presuming that the instructor is desirable, there are obvious corollary benefits to honors students and to the institution as well, many of which relate to the benefits outlined in the comprehensive but far from exhaustive list presented here. It should be emphasized that these gains are mostly mutual: what benefits honors students and institutions also benefits honors instructors.

What are the advantages of teaching honors in terms of benefits to the teacher? First and foremost, teaching an honors course affords one the opportunity to teach and work with consistently strong students: those who are not invariably but generally the brightest and most able, the hardest-working and

ON THE BENEFITS OF TEACHING HONORS

most highly motivated. Honors students tend to be remarkably proactive and conscientious. Teaching an honors course gives an instructor the chance to work with students who will, to a far greater degree than their non-honors peers, seriously and attentively read and prepare for class and complete all assignments. Teaching honors offers a professor an opportunity to spend quality time with students who sincerely desire to be in the classroom or laboratory—students who enjoy reading and learning not merely for a grade or a requirement, but for intellectual stimulation and growth.

Not only does teaching an honors course allow professors an opportunity to interact with a different and typically stronger student cohort, but it also affords professors a chance (indeed, a need) to hone their teaching skills, knowing that they will be challenged and must keep on their toes. This might seem like a dicey benefit since it carries a burden of increased work on the teacher's part, yet the profits outweigh the costs. Whereas questions posed by an instructor to a non-honors college class may go unanswered, this is seldom the case in an honors classroom. Statements and observations offered by faculty and students alike almost invariably provoke remarks and stimulate further discussion in an honors classroom. It is true that faculty may need to work a bit harder in preparing for and teaching honors courses, but with a receptive audience all that effort proves worthwhile.

In this regard, honors courses give teachers opportunities to explore new pedagogical strategies and settings. They give professors the chance to step out of their comfort zones and experiment. On the one hand, they offer an opportunity to experiment or tinker with an existing course and receive thoughtful, reliable feedback. On the other hand, an honors course can provide faculty the ideal opportunity to teach a new "dream course," either within or outside the instructor's specific area of expertise. Such courses often allow faculty the motive, method, and opportunity to teach an unusual special topic class, perhaps on a one-time basis, if so desired or needed. Thus honors courses give professors valuable teaching experience, both in terms of subject matter and teaching methods, since either the topics or techniques may be wholly new or tried from a new angle or approach.

Teaching an honors course therefore offers an occasion to broaden one's perspectives, both professionally and personally. As scholars we tend to be narrow specialists, and honors courses (and students) generally enable faculty to extend their focus outside these limited bounds. Teaching an honors course affords professors the valuable prospect of intellectual stimulation—a chance to learn. They give the teacher a chance to add to his or her "continuing education." Honors courses in general focus less on content coverage and more on thinking. This emphasis should hold genuine appeal not only for honors students but particularly for instructors who are tired of teaching required general education courses that stipulate consistent coverage. Still, because of honors students' generally superior preparation and performance, even honors courses bound by content coverage offer a chance for faculty to investigate topics in greater depth, breadth, or intensity than regular courses allow.

In some cases an honors course offers professors the occasion to team teach, and even when many professors would normally be unwilling to teach with another instructor, they often find, to their surprise, that team-teaching itself brings clear rewards. Such benefits include, in addition to a good dose of the intellectual stimulation and expansion already mentioned, the opportunity to learn and practice new pedagogical methods. Often, instructors' strengths and weaknesses are magnified when another instructor is observing or participating, providing the impetus for a renewed focus on pedagogy. Also, team teaching shows students how different scholars, particularly scholars from different fields of study, approach a given topic or question. A particular benefit in team-taught classrooms accrues when students observe fruitful exchanges between multiple instructors, who may not agree upon particular issues but nonetheless work together to find a solution.

Not only do honors students benefit from such exposure to new ideas and information, but honors teachers also reap this reward, especially when they collaborate with colleagues in disciplines outside their own. Honors courses tend to stimulate precisely this sort of interdisciplinary thought. Honors courses may even provide an occasion for professors to connect with faculty (especially honors faculty) at other institutions.

Since honors class sizes are often restricted, they provide a chance to teach smaller groups than normal, often in a seminar or other discussion setting. This is especially beneficial to professors who generally teach large lecture sections for it provides the chance to teach more discussion-oriented courses with a more interactive environment. Likewise, professors who typically teach content-driven courses should appreciate the appeal of honors courses, which nearly always have a more intense emphasis on speaking and writing. In general, honors courses offer an opening to "break outside" the normal classroom, with trips or activities geared especially to students with better background and motivation. More often than non-honors courses, honors courses include research components or other experiential learning. The best honors courses do not offer merely an accelerated or advanced version of a regularly offered course; they offer something different.

In that regard, honors courses allow faculty better integration of faculty research and teaching. They allow professors the chance to meet and work with students who may very well end up doing undergraduate research, perhaps in the professor's area of specialization. Honors courses generally involve students with diverse interests so that they not only offer professors the prospect of working with students outside their normal disciplines or major departments but also provide an interesting setting for discussion and dialogue, no matter what the course material or topic may be. Thus honors faculty often end up interacting with students outside the classroom, and not only for research. Professors of honors courses can also reap the benefit of advising the best students, whether students choose or are assigned to their faculty advisor.

Not only student research but also faculty research is another beneficiary of honors teaching. Honors courses give professors the opportunity to publish

ON THE BENEFITS OF TEACHING HONORS

papers in numerous peer-reviewed journals (in many disciplines) that publish on pedagogy. This benefit may be especially important for—and thus must be heard by—those professors who may resist teaching in honors because they feel it will pull them away from their “comfort zone” of regularly offered courses (in their major department) and research and publication in their content areas.

Honors courses often come with perks (for example, course development stipends in the summer or in the same or an earlier semester) that make such courses more appealing and lucrative. Honors courses allow faculty to obtain special funding or other institutional resources earmarked for honors curricula or events, thus creating an opportunity to make that “dream course” even more special, memorable, popular, and effective.

In addition to these benefits, honors courses provide an opportunity to share leadership responsibility with students. For example, some honors courses offer students the opportunity to serve as “co-teachers” by leading discussions. Consulting students about their learning experience also gives them the freedom (and the responsibility) to help direct the progression of the course and potentially to allow it to develop according to their own interests and backgrounds.

Faculty can teach honors for selfless as well as selfish motives. Seen more broadly, and more altruistically, honors courses allow faculty to elicit the most from their institution’s student population. Honors courses can aid in the recruitment and retention of top students, and they can create an intellectual climate that permeates the campus.

Undoubtedly this essay has overlooked some general benefits, and there will likely be additional particular benefits that apply to your institution or program. If you look closely at your local situation, you are apt to find many items to add to the list presented here. You may also find particular disincentives at your institution that discourage faculty from participating in honors, and a careful study of these drawbacks can reveal ways to enlist new faculty by either alleviating or circumventing these disincentives.

If you are desperate to recruit honors instructors and have not been successful with direct, personal pleas to colleagues, consider offering an afternoon or evening workshop, perhaps with a small stipend from your honors budget for attendees, to describe and explain the details, and myriad benefits, of teaching in honors. Such a workshop session could be led by honors faculty or administrators at your institution or even from another school. The latter possibility, like the offering of even a meager stipend, presumably could attract more participants.

Faculty can be targeted in other ways as well, such as inviting them to attend honors classes or social events (e.g., picnics or meals at an honors house) or asking honors students to approach particular faculty members directly. The latter tactic not only may sway recalcitrant faculty but could also yield outstanding professors who might otherwise escape the gaze of honors directors, just as it can engage honors students and enable them to feel greater involvement and investment in their honors education.

All of the above benefits have occurred in my own personal experience teaching honors courses. I have never taught a course remotely close to my specialized research area, but I have taught, in addition to my routine courses, several successful and immensely gratifying honors courses—both within and outside my discipline of biology—that enriched my mind and spirit. A one-semester honors seminar on “Culture” posed questions that students seldom stop to ponder, such as what exactly culture is, something uniquely human or also found in non-human species. Likewise, a one-semester seminar on the “History and Philosophy of Ecology” discussed varying views of nature, specifically whether humans are a part of or apart from nature. These courses were open to all honors students and particularly popular with non-science students whom I might not otherwise have taught—another decided benefit of honors teaching.

In addition, I have team-taught several year-long honors seminars. One, co-taught with a colleague in classics (whose specialty is ancient philosophy) on “Ways of Knowing,” first explored epistemology generally and later focused on its application to science: What does it mean to say that we know something in science? How exactly do we know that thing, and how well? I co-taught another such year-long honors seminar on two occasions with a colleague in rhetoric and humanities (whose specialty is Victorian literature). In this seminar on “Morality and Human Nature,” the class discussed various explanations for the origin of ethics, biological and otherwise.

In all of these courses the author—who is most frequently found diagramming on the blackboard the pathway of electrons in photosynthesis or a flow-chart of hormonal interactions in the human endocrine system—incorporated novels, short stories, and poetry, plus current items from newspapers and popular magazines. In all of these courses the class viewed and discussed popular films and television shows. In all of these courses instructors followed a syllabus but were not held captive by the demon urge to “cover content” at all costs, and the development and tenor of the course depended more than ever on student input. In all of these courses instructors were able to engage students in a dialogue on important and influential ideas. In all of these courses we interacted with students whose intellect matched or exceeded our own. We did not so much teach these students *what to think* as *how to think*, and I would not have traded these invaluable experiences for anything. This is not to imply that non-honors courses are a stodgy, boring waste of time for faculty and students, but at the same time experience shows that non-honors courses do not consistently yield the depth and breadth of memorable personal and professional experiences that honors teaching provides.

Thus, finally, do not forget a simple truth that I—and perhaps you as well—have learned: none of my colleagues who have taught an honors course has ever regretted it whereas professors who have never taught honors have much to regret. That statement alone speaks volumes, presuming you can just get the right people to hear it. Even if you do not teach honors yourself, be sure to spread the word. Teaching an honors course affords the opportunity to teach students who

ON THE BENEFITS OF TEACHING HONORS

will appreciate, and take advantage of, all of their professors' hard work and efforts and who will undoubtedly teach their professors something in return.

Understandably, professors are apt to flee the prospect of additional work, particularly if they cannot see corresponding benefits. Be honest and do not whitewash or sugarcoat the truth when trying to enlist new honors faculty. The general observation that honors students are very responsive and attentive can be both a blessing and a blight in that high-maintenance students can sap professors' time from other pursuits. However, if you can get potential honors instructors to recognize the many real and robust rewards of teaching honors, and if you can get new faculty recruits to speak with other professors who have taught honors, then you may, if you are lucky, have to contend with a new problem—figuring out how to turn potential honors instructors down, or at least putting them on a “wait list.” A strong honors faculty translates into a stronger honors program and curriculum. When this happens, your former concerns about honors faculty recruitment may become a distant memory indeed.

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