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The Senior Honors Thesis: From Millstone to Capstone

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When I became director of a small college honors program, many students perceived the senior honors thesis to be a millstone. Even worse, the word was being bruited about that students didn't really have to complete the thesis, that the only penalty was not being listed in the separate section for honors scholars in the graduation program. Although the discussion below is about redeeming the thesis process in a small program, some of the strategies should be applicable to large programs as well.

After a brief discussion of the possibility of having two honors tracks, one without the thesis, the Honors Council decided to retain the thesis requirement for all students. The thinking was that, since honors courses were interdisciplinary and required projects rather than traditional papers and formal exams, a substantial honors thesis would demonstrate the student's ability to do independent research, the surest ticket to graduate school in this era of grade inflation and glowing recommendations. With murmurs about Draconian measures, the Honors Council handed the problem back to me.

My first step was to hear what the students had to say. Their most frequent complaints were that the thesis was not related to the rest of the program, that it was just one more hoop to jump through, and that it was an additional burden in the senior year when they were completing their major and other university requirements. Some argued that the honors thesis was superfluous since their major required substantial research in senior seminars. These were reasonable objections, and I realized there would be no quick fix to the problem. In fact, the changes, one step at a time, took two full years.

During the first couple of semesters, the honors thesis process was gradually elaborated; new or modified courses, online discussions, and formal student presentations were developed to morph a task for seniors into an ongoing, four-year concern. The first step was to do away with the generic thesis preparation course students had been taking with an instructor from the English department and replace it with individual independent studies taken as juniors with a thesis advisor from the student's major department. The generic course had been unnecessary for students in majors such as biology, history, and English, which emphasized research in all advanced courses, and it was insufficient for students in majors such as communications and education, which taught skills and techniques but did not require substantial research. This

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change meant that each student would spend three full semesters working on a thesis with an advisor in her/his discipline, without increasing the number of honors credits required.

Instead of submitting a thesis proposal to the Honors Council for approval by all its members half way through the senior year, as had been the case, written thesis proposals in the new system were approved by the thesis advisor, one member of the Honors Council, and the honors program director by specified dates in the spring of the student's junior year. A new wrinkle was to have thesis proposals also formally presented on campus to an audience including the Honors Council, thesis advisors, and sophomores in the honors program. Additionally, first-semester juniors were required to come up with a thesis topic and locate a faculty member willing to work with them as an advisor, so that, for all practical purposes, the thesis had become a four-semester project. An online discussion of problems, solutions, hazards to avoid, and difficulties encountered or resolved in developing thesis proposals or completing theses was made available to all honors students. In their first honors writing course, freshmen were informed that it fulfilled the first of two university writing requirements and that their honors thesis would complete this requirement. Students in majors requiring substantial research were encouraged also to follow the honors program guidelines with topics they were working on in their majors, even if this meant some flexibility in schedules, due dates, and the like.

With these elaborations, the honors thesis truly became a capstone experience. It was understood that the thesis had to be submitted and approved by those who had accepted the proposal and also publicly presented as a paper or poster. Venues included national, regional, and state honors conferences, regional conferences sponsored by the various disciplines, and, for those remaining, an on-campus presentation to which faculty and all honors students were invited. Some five years of exit interviews before my retirement confirmed the value of the thesis. Several students reported they had featured their thesis research in applications to graduate school or had been asked about their theses during interviews for admission to medical or law schools and other graduate programs. One student, after reading a sophisticated paper at a regional biology conference, was pleased that a number of auditors had gathered around her with questions after the session was concluded and was nonplussed when a senior professor asked where she had taken her Ph.D.!

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