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Beyond the Great Books: Increasing the Flexibility, Scope, and Appeal of an Honors Curriculum

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Two traditional models for honors programs are a chronological Great Books structure and a theme-based approach. Recently, the comparative virtues of these two models have been the subject of practical and theoretical analyses at Central Washington University (CWU), which is in the process of implementing a new honors curriculum to replace its longstanding Great Books program. The new curriculum consists of variable topics courses that satisfy general education requirements and contribute to an honors minor, as well as an upper-division scholarship experience in which students complete advanced research with faculty mentors.

As our experience demonstrates, a Great Books-based curriculum has inherent limitations that make it inappropriate for the student population at a large state university like CWU. There are important educational and logistical virtues to a program organized around interdisciplinary courses and multiple curricular options for students, virtues that are absent in a curriculum designed around specific canonical texts. The new program provides the flexibility and academic diversity that is needed to attract a wider variety of students while retaining the advantages of the old program: small class sizes, innovative pedagogy, student-led discussions, and an exposure to the great works of world literature.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PROGRAM

The Great Books curriculum at CWU began as an informal reading group in the early 1970s, when the university had no honors program. Coursework was formalized and students were first invited to join the honors college in 1977. The college was named for William O. Douglas, the U.S. Supreme Court justice who was from the area and was a staunch supporter of the liberal arts. The initial class of the William O. Douglas Honors College (DHC) consisted of six students and four professors, and they spent the first two weeks discussing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in their entirety.

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The structure of the curriculum remained largely the same for over thirty years: students had weekly lectures on the material, usually from a specialist who guest lectured, followed by weekly colloquia in which students discussed their papers with one another, guided by a colloquium instructor. Changes to the program were incremental and largely cosmetic. The pace of the reading assignments slowed in an effort to make the workload more practicable given students' other commitments and more appropriate to the number of credits—they were eventually given three weeks to complete *War and Peace*, for example. In addition, new books were added to supplement a reading list that was at first dominated by white males: Mary Wollstonecraft, W. E. B. DuBois, Mohandas Gandhi, Virginia Woolf, and Gabriel García Márquez, among others.

Still, the DHC remained surprisingly free of politically charged debates about the canon that were initiated by Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch, among others. The real concern was student numbers. Over the last thirty years, enrollment at CWU's main campus has varied between about 6,000 and 8,000 students. Consistently, the DHC has had less than 1% of the student population enrolled in the program, a much lower proportion of students than are in the honors colleges at Central's peer institutions. Entering classes usually ranged from between fifteen and thirty students, with many of them leaving the program at various points in their college careers. Senior classes almost invariably consisted of fewer than ten students.

There were several reasons for low enrollment. First, the program was inflexible, requiring students to take four years of lectures and colloquia, preferably in order and preferably every quarter. This requirement interfered with some demanding majors (with many required classes and possible time conflicts), study abroad, and student teaching; students who skipped a quarter in the DHC would have to take two sets of DHC courses the next year to "catch up." Transfer students, even students who discovered the DHC after being at Central for a quarter, were all but excluded from participating.

The second problem was that honors students were asked to do a lot of work for very few credits and to complete separate general education requirements as well as their majors and minors. Honors students registered for just three credit hours in the DHC every quarter. The number was purposely set low to accommodate students' other academic obligations, but DHC courses remained reading- and writing-intensive. As students completed their general education requirements and were expected to dedicate more time to advanced courses in their majors, or when they had to resolve time conflicts with honors courses, typically students abandoned the DHC. Although the DHC became a minor-granting program a few years ago, the bottom line is that there was not enough incentive to remain with the program as other obligations became more pressing.

Of course, the program did offer students a wonderful opportunity to receive a classic liberal arts education at a large state institution. The rigid design of the curriculum kept cohorts of students together for four years, during

which the students developed close friendships and a sense of collegiality. They helped one another with writing and reading comprehension, both in and out of class. Discussions were always lively and informed. Those who remained with the program were enthusiastically committed to it and were able to satisfy their broad intellectual curiosity. And, of course, the reading list was amazing: novels and poetry, philosophy, religion, political theory, and the history and philosophy of science, from authors such as Plato, Aquinas, Shakespeare, Milton, Newton, Tocqueville, and Faulkner.

THE NEW CURRICULUM STRUCTURE

Committees were formed several times over the years to revise the program, but invariably they merely tinkered with the existing structure, adding additional perks and changing the reading list slightly. Low student numbers eventually forced a new group of faculty to make a radical break from the traditional model. A faculty committee was charged with creating a more flexible program that would allow existing and transfer students to join, be more enticing to students while continuing to challenge them in writing-intensive courses (including the completion of a senior thesis), draw participants from throughout the university, and integrate with an already established science honors program.

The committee designed an honors curriculum that consists of two distinct but related tiers: a core curriculum of lower-division breadth requirements and an upper-division scholarship experience. By completing the core curriculum, DHC students satisfy their general education requirements in special honors courses; their general education requirements are distinct from those for non-honors students. By taking a subset of these core courses plus one additional course (History of Science), students also receive an interdisciplinary honors minor. As juniors and seniors, students then have the option of either leaving the DHC to focus on their majors *or* continuing in the program and pursuing advanced research either in the sciences *or* in the arts and humanities. Students who complete both parts of the program are designated DHC Scholars and graduate with honors from the university.

The two-tiered structure is our attempt to make the program attractive to entering freshmen, existing CWU students, and community college students who transfer to CWU with their associate degrees. New students can begin taking DHC courses immediately to satisfy general education requirements; students who have already taken some college courses, including courses at Central, can take honors courses (as equivalents) to fill gaps in their non-honors general education requirements; and transfer students who have completed their general education requirements can skip the core curriculum and immediately enter one of the upper-division scholarship experiences. In short, the new curriculum allows for multiple entry points and serves a variety of students. Students are no longer required to be a part of the DHC for four years, beginning the moment they enroll (as freshmen) at Central. (For a diagram of the curriculum, see Appendix A.)

THE CORE CURRICULUM

The DHC core curriculum consists of interdisciplinary courses that expose students to a broad range of topics. Unlike the Great Books program, which primarily drew on the humanities and was taught by the same professors year after year, the new curriculum has different courses taught by different professors every year, from a number of different departments. The course titles are as follows:

- DHC 140/141: Humanistic Understanding I and II (5 credits each)
- DHC 150/151: Aesthetic Experience I and II (5 credits each)
- DHC 160/161: Physical and Biological Systems I and II (5 credits each)
- DHC 250/251: Social and Behavioral Dynamics I and II (5 credits each)
- DHC 260/261: Cultural Competence I and II (5 credits each)
- DHC 270: Integrated Learning (5 credits)

None of these courses have designated topics or set reading lists; they need not cover specific Great Books or a particular historical period. Rather, the course titles—Humanistic Understanding, etc.—are general categories within which variable topics are taught, provided that they satisfy appropriate learner outcomes. (See Appendix B.)

Together, these outcomes fulfill the mission of the general education program at Central Washington University. Specifically, DHC coursework “offers undergraduate students a liberal arts education in order to cultivate thoughtful and responsible persons and citizens, to prepare them for the world of work and to teach them to pursue knowledge for its own sake” (*Central Washington University 2009–2010 Undergraduate/Graduate Catalog*, p. 36). Because the aims of the honors core curriculum are related to the mission of the university’s general education program, DHC professors and students can be assessed against outcomes that reflect the character of the institution as a whole, but classes can also be tailored to the specific needs of our most academically talented students. Students who complete these core courses, as well as developing proficiencies in mathematics and a foreign language (either at the university or in high school), satisfy the DHC’s and the university’s general education requirements.

The separate mathematics requirement is meant to develop students’ quantitative reasoning abilities, but some members of the DHC Curriculum Committee have questioned whether the existing requirement accomplishes that goal. Currently, students must be proficient in math through MATH 154: Pre-calculus Mathematics II; this means that different students have different courses to take, usually depending on what they took in high school. Students with little background in math may have to take three classes to prepare for and complete MATH 154 while others satisfy the math proficiency simply by

testing into college-level calculus. In the future, the committee may replace the math requirement with one course in quantitative reasoning that would be required of all honors students. As we envision it now, the course would use magazine and newspaper articles as primary source material to help students develop the power and habit of mind to search out quantitative information, critique it, reflect upon it, and apply it in their public, personal, and professional lives. The projects and case studies in the course would largely change from year to year based on current events. For example, in the context of the health care debate, students might analyze the risks and benefits of early and frequent screenings for breast and prostate cancers, including the monetary cost and the overall effect on patients' prognoses, to determine how significant the medical benefits are, in relative and absolute terms. Such a course would be more in keeping with the aims of a general education curriculum, would be more appropriate for people from a variety of disciplines, would cater to a small cohort of honors students, and would treat students more equitably.

COURSE SELECTION

Although there are specific learner outcomes for each breadth requirement, the new curriculum provides students with a diverse range of intellectual experiences. Core courses in the honors program need not be taken sequentially; for example, Cultural Competence I is not a prerequisite for Cultural Competence II. Although pairs of courses share learner outcomes, the subject matter varies depending on who is teaching the course and how the person decides to fulfill the outcomes. Each year, professors from throughout the university propose courses to a group of faculty, the DHC Curriculum Committee, that chooses the best among the proposals to be offered the following year. Faculty members are paid to develop the courses and may be asked to teach them more than once in successive years. Proposals are selected based on how well they meet the learner outcomes, the course content, and the pedagogical techniques to be employed. Class numbers are limited to twenty students, so we encourage faculty to include student participation as much as possible. Lectures, both by the designated instructor and guest speakers, have their place in the new curriculum, just as they had their place in the Great Books program. However, the committee encourages professors to incorporate student-led discussions, class presentations, and service-learning into their classes, all of which have been shown to improve academic performance and promote students' sense of investment in the work (cf. Brookfield and Preskill; Eyler and Giles). We also gauge student interest in the proposals by making anonymous versions of them available along with "ballots" so that students can indicate their preferences.

Courses that transgress traditional disciplinary boundaries have long held great promise for higher education (Kockelmans). Although the DHC retains some discipline-specific practices, such as required labs in Physical and Biological Systems courses, the DHC provides a venue for professors to explore

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issues from multiple perspectives. For example, in winter 2010 a psychology professor is teaching an Integrated Learning course titled Behavioral Genetics: Science, Ethics, and Literature, in which students learn basic genetic concepts and research strategies, consider how genetics shapes people's behavior and psychology, and confront the ethics of genetic research and screening. Students critically evaluate the social impact of genetic screening and engineering by discussing novels such as H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Although the biology department at CWU offers several courses on genetics, none of them cover behavioral genetics, nor do they address the growing ethical concerns related to genetic screening and counseling. The subject matter and readings in the DHC class go beyond those of a typical biology or psychology class. The Douglas Honors College thus attracts professors with broad intellectual interests and an enthusiasm for cross-disciplinary connections.

DHC courses are also distinctive because they provide opportunities for faculty to work more closely with students. Research has shown that small class sizes improve academic performance by allowing for a more interactive experience with the instructor (Crittenden, Norr, and LeBailly; Krueger). Professors take advantage of the rapport with students to do projects they would not normally be able to do in a fifty- or sixty-person class. For example, this year a music instructor is teaching an Aesthetic Experience course titled Ten Quartets, in which he and the quartet of which he is a member give private live performances for the students every week. Each composition is used as a departure point to explore a broad spectrum of literature and art as well as cultural, intellectual, and political history. In addition to giving lectures and leading class discussions, the professor engages students in guided listening exercises, which require more individualized instruction. Obviously, these courses (Behavioral Genetics and Ten Quartets) are different from typical core offerings such as General Psychology and Introduction to Western Art, both of which satisfy general education requirements for non-honors students at Central.

Honors courses in the new curriculum do not entirely abandon the Great Books tradition, but they do relate those books to more recent work on a specific theme. For example, this year a philosophy professor is teaching a Humanistic Understanding course titled Trauma: Memory, History, and Identity. John Locke's and David Hume's theories of personal identity form the basis for discussions of the complex relation between memory and identity, but students also read Oliver Sacks's *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, which examines neurological anomalies in an effort to understand the foundation of personhood. In order to trace the effect of history on identity, students read parts of Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, G. W. F. Hegel's *Introduction to the 'Philosophy of History,'* and the founding documents of the United States as well as literary works by Jorge Luis Borges and Charles Simic. Students then examine the undermining of identity through psychological and historical trauma by studying Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the*

Pleasure Principle alongside contemporary writings by Cornel West and Judith Butler. Classic and contemporary works in psychology, literature, history, and philosophy give students a broad exposure to a history of ideas in which the Great Books are brought into conversation with contemporary thinkers.

As mentioned earlier, students take such interdisciplinary, theme-based courses to satisfy general education requirements. These courses, along with the History of Science, also earn them an interdisciplinary honors minor, which is an enticement for students whose majors require them to declare a separate minor. By focusing on the complex relations among science, literature, philosophy, and religion, the History of Science is not just another science course; rather, it is a history course that, ideally, is taught by a historian or a philosopher; it is an attempt to bridge the gap between what C. P. Snow calls “the two cultures,” to show that the scientific process developed historically and contingently, and that science and the humanities have dramatically influenced one another. The most recent History of Science course is titled Great Scientific Experiments, in which the ideals, ideas, and goals of science are understood through a number of experiments that have fundamentally transformed the way we think about ourselves and the world—Galileo’s investigations regarding the Law of Descent, Lavoisier’s work on the Oxygen Theory of Combustion, the Meselson-Stahl experiment on DNA replication, etc.

UPPER-DIVISION SCHOLARSHIP EXPERIENCES

The History of Science is also a kind of bridge course to the upper-division scholarship experience because it serves as a shared classroom experience for honors students with a variety of academic interests whose work progressively becomes more specialized. After completing their core requirements, junior and senior honors students enter one of two separate but related programs: Science Honors or Arts & Humanities Honors. An honors research program in the physical sciences has existed at Central for several years, with a small cohort of students taking courses in how to do advanced research and then working closely over the summer with faculty mentors to conduct experiments that culminate in publishable articles. The new Science Honors program will allow students to fulfill their DHC requirements by doing either this summer research (with a stipend) or a less intensive research experience during the academic year. The DHC will also allow students to pursue work in either the physical sciences or the social sciences. Students in the new Arts & Humanities Honors curriculum will have a parallel experience: each student will either research and write a formal thesis or will complete a creative project such as a painting or series of paintings, a collection of poetry, or a play, along with an essay explaining the artist’s own work through the lens of aesthetic theory and art history.

For much of their upper-division scholarship experience, Science Honors students and Arts & Humanities Honors students take different courses; the cohort of honors students is not as tight in the junior and senior years. However,

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students in the two programs are required to take two specific courses together. In addition to the History of Science, all upper-division honors students must take an Interdisciplinary Honors Seminar in which they explore a topic or historical event from multiple disciplinary perspectives. For example, a course on evolution examines not only evolutionary theory and its misappropriation as a theory of cultural hierarchy but also its cultural impact, including the debate over the teaching of evolution and creationism. A seminar on ethics and technology covers such topics as the historical impact of technology on a culture's development (including technological determinism), the ethics of human cloning, theories of artificial intelligence, and the legal issues involved in regulating nanotechnology. The history course and the interdisciplinary seminar provide a shared experience for all upper-division students.

As students continue in the program, the requirements for Science Honors and Arts & Humanities Honors become separate and more specialized. Because of the very different methodologies and expectations for advanced work in, for example, biology versus philosophy, students in the two programs take different courses in research and writing that are tailored more specifically to their fields. Finally, Science Honors students do supervised research in the lab and write their theses while Arts & Humanities Honors students research and complete their theses or creative projects, all the while working with faculty mentors. Students who complete both the DHC general education requirements and one of the upper-division scholarship experiences (either Science Honors or Arts & Humanities Honors) graduate with honors from the university.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE NEW CURRICULUM

Among the many advantages of this new curricular structure, the most important for us are the program's flexibility and multiple entry points. Students may join the DHC their first quarter at Central or later, and transfer students from community colleges may enter directly into one of the upper-division scholarship experiences. The whole program can be completed in three years or spread out over four years to allow for student teaching, study abroad, and demanding major requirements; that is, students can vary the number of honors courses they take in any given quarter. Students have more reasons to remain in the program: satisfying general education requirements, earning a minor, graduating with honors from the university (for completing the entire curriculum), and producing a publishable piece of research with a faculty mentor. Professors from departments throughout the university offer courses in the DHC, and students from many different majors, including students in the sciences, have reason to enter the program. Students can tailor their advanced honors work to their academic interests. Also, a curriculum grounded in specific learner outcomes is much easier to assess and improve over time than a program whose only unifying element is the canonical status of the assigned

readings (Reilman, Varhus, and Whipple; Otero and Spurrier), and it is more clearly related to the university's mission, which makes it easier to justify funding for an honors program at a large, public institution like Central Washington University—easier, that is, than explaining the need for a traditional Great Books program that serves only a handful of students.

In addition, the new curriculum retains what is good about the old program. Classics in the field are incorporated into the new courses, where they are related to a given theme rather than studied chronologically. The courses are interdisciplinary and give students a broad liberal arts education, with a firm background in the history of ideas. Despite some variation from course to course, a fairly tight-knit cohort of honors students develops over successive quarters. Innovative pedagogy and student discussions remain a hallmark of the honors experience. Finally, as with the old program, the full honors experience includes a thesis.

Of course, the new curriculum also has some drawbacks. With no one course that every honors student must take—one of the casualties of a flexible curriculum—the students do not feel as strong a sense of community as they did under the more structured Great Books program. In addition, the Great Books are not covered as thoroughly and are not read chronologically, so students do not necessarily see how different books relate to one another historically. Colleagues at other institutions have suggested a variety of remedies, such as offering a one-year historical introduction to the Great Books that is required of everyone. However, it would be difficult to cover works from the Bible to *The Bell Jar* in a mere thirty weeks. Such a class would also risk alienating those with time conflicts or other obligations that make it difficult to commit to three successive quarters of honors classes. The problem of inflexibility reemerges.

CONCLUSION

The Great Books program at Central Washington University was not dismissed lightly, but it was undone because of our inability to teach the Great Books in a way that meets the needs of our particular student population. Low recruitment and retention rates provided us with the necessary impetus to reevaluate the curriculum and to devise an honors program that is equally challenging and educational but that is more attractive to the best and brightest students in the Northwest. In addition to its flexibility, the new curriculum respects interdisciplinarity, supports innovative teaching, is more easily and reliably assessed, and continues to provide students with a broad education in the liberal arts.

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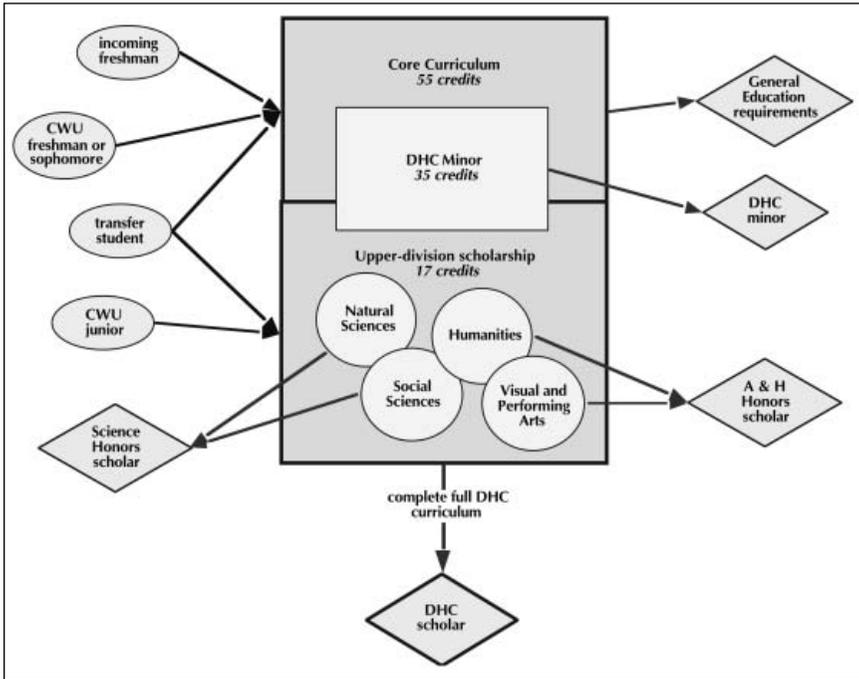
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APPENDIX A

WILLIAM O. DOUGLAS HONORS COLLEGE ACADEMIC STRUCTURE



APPENDIX B

DOUGLAS HONORS COLLEGE COURSES: LEARNER OUTCOMES

DHC 140, 141. Douglas Honors College Humanistic Understanding I and II (5 credits each). Variable topic. Courses in the humanities focuses on the analysis and interpretation of human stories of the past, present and future in order to understand the processes of continuity and change in individuals and cultures through both documented and imaginative accounts.

Learner outcomes for Humanistic Understanding:

- Students will be able to examine ways in which beliefs and values affect interpretations of experience and events.
- Students will be able to reason about causes and effects within historical contexts and across historical periods.
- Students will be able to analyze the interrelatedness of human concerns.
- Students will be effective in using written and oral communication skills both in form and structure.
- Students will demonstrate strong critical and creative thinking skills.
- Students will be able to interact openly, respectfully, and knowledgeably with those from different backgrounds and perspectives.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to investigate problems new to themselves, draw conclusions, and evaluate source materials utilized in these investigations.

DHC 150, 151. Douglas Honors College Aesthetic Experience I and II (5 credits each). Variable topic. Courses in this area explore questions about the nature of art; to understand, interrogate, and engage in the creative process; and to explore the connections between art, culture, and history.

Learner outcomes for Aesthetic Experience:

- Students will be able to participate in imaginative/artistic production.
- Students will be able to explain aesthetic experiences and expressions within their historical, artistic, and cultural traditions.
- Students will be able to interact openly, respectfully, and knowledgeably with those from different backgrounds and perspectives.
- Students will be effective in using written and oral communication skills both in form and structure.
- Students will demonstrate strong critical and creative thinking skills.

DHC 160, 161. Douglas Honors College Physical and Biological Systems I and II (5 credits each). Variable topic. Courses in this area study physical and life systems, provide basic methods for rigorously describing the natural world, or treat social, economic, technological, ethical or other implications of natural phenomena.

Learner outcomes for Physical and Biological Systems:

- Students will be able to apply scientific methods and forms of inquiry and to describe phenomena and predict consequences.
- Students will be able to use knowledge of basic scientific disciplines to examine large and complex physical and life systems.
- Students will be able to use knowledge of basic scientific disciplines to make informed decisions and address issues of human concern.
- Students will be effective in using written and oral communication skills both in form and structure.
- Students will demonstrate strong critical and creative thinking skills.
- Students will demonstrate strong analytical skills including quantitative and experimental techniques.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to investigate problems new to themselves, draw conclusions, and evaluate source materials utilized in these investigations.

DHC 250, 251. Douglas Honors College Social and Behavior Dynamics I and II (5 credits each). Variable topic. Courses focus on how individuals, cultures, and societies operate and evolve and introduce disciplined ways of thinking about individuals and groups.

Learner outcomes for Social and Behavioral Dynamics:

- Students will be able to reason about principles of human behavior for understanding self and others.
- Students will be able to examine implications of participation in social groups and institutions to inform ethical interaction.
- Students will be able to use apply critical thinking to specific situations involving personal and community decision-making.
- Students will be effective in using written and oral communication skills both in form and structure.
- Students will demonstrate strong critical and creative thinking skills.
- Students will demonstrate strong analytical skills including quantitative and experimental techniques.

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- Students will demonstrate the ability to investigate problems new to themselves, draw conclusions, and evaluate source materials utilized in these investigations.
- Students will be able to interact openly, respectfully, and knowledgeably with those from different backgrounds and perspectives.

DHC 260, 261. Douglas Honors College Cultural Competence I and II (5 credits each). Variable topic. Courses focus on negotiating cultural differences by applying appropriate patterns of understanding and behavior in culturally diverse settings. Courses focus on one or more non-dominant cultures or peoples of the United States.

Learner outcomes for Cultural Competence:

- Students will be able to demonstrate a capacity for cultural self-assessment.
- Students will be able to observe and analyze the dynamics of cultural interaction.
- Students will be able to critically evaluate evidence of institutionalized cultural assumptions as they affect individuals and groups.
- Students will be effective in using written and oral communication skills both in form and structure.
- Students will demonstrate strong critical and creative thinking skills.
- Students will demonstrate strong analytical skills including quantitative and experimental techniques.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to investigate problems new to themselves, draw conclusions, and evaluate source materials utilized in these investigations.
- Students will be able to interact openly, respectfully, and knowledgeably with those from different backgrounds and perspectives.

DHC 270. Douglas Honors College Integrated Learning (5 credits). Variable topic. Courses take an interdisciplinary approach to examining social, economic, technological, ethical, cultural or aesthetic implications of knowledge. In addition to department courses that embrace multiple disciplines, these opportunities include learning community, service learning, and international studies courses.

Learner outcomes for Integrated Learning:

- Students will be able to develop an appreciation for the interconnectedness of modes of inquiry across disciplines.
- Students will be able to identify and explore connections between or among different disciplines to explain or inquire about phenomena.

- Students will be able to solve problems that require multidisciplinary approaches.
- Students will be effective in using written and oral communication skills both in form and structure.
- Students will demonstrate strong critical and creative thinking skills.
- Students will demonstrate strong analytical skills including quantitative and experimental techniques.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to investigate problems new to themselves, draw conclusions, and evaluate source materials utilized in these investigations.
- Students will be able to interact openly, respectfully, and knowledgeably with those from different backgrounds and perspectives.

DHC 380. History of Science (5 credits). Introduction to major themes in the history of science. Investigation of historical and scientific methods through the study of particular historical cases.

Learner outcomes for History of Science:

- Students will describe the historical development of the scientific process.
- Students will recognize the essential elements of a scientific investigation.
- Students will apply the methods of scientific inquiry to issues of contemporary relevance.

