

CHAPTER THREE

Honors Contracts: Empowering Students and Fostering Autonomy in Honors Education

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Although culturally mandated as a gateway to professional opportunities and wealth, college degrees are the prerogative of only half of the United States population, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (Musu-Gillette et al. v). Even those who attend college do not always acquire the training they need to achieve their goals: the lack of written communication or analytical skills directly impacts retention and completion, particularly of students underprepared for college. The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) website features a “Diversity and Inclusion Statement” under its “Definition of Honors Education,” and the organization has placed equity and inclusion at the heart of its current strategic plan. In this chapter, I argue that honors contracts offer honors educators a way to “promote the inclusion and success

of academically motivated and high-potential learners from all communities, understanding that each of us holds varied, intersectional identities” (“Diversity and Inclusion Statement”). The work of the University Honors Program (UHP) at the University of Kansas (KU) shows that honors contracts act as far more than stopgaps to address honors course shortages: they can facilitate access to honors, increase completion, democratize key aspects of the honors experience, provide students with structured avenues for building relationships with faculty members, and empower students to own their educational experiences.

As Richard Badenhausen suggests, despite their commonality across honors education, contracts have rarely been the focus of serious scholarship and responsible pedagogical debate. When they are mentioned, authors typically describe them as “viable” (Bolch 57) but not preferable because they put “an unnecessary burden on both students [. . .] and faculty” (Wilson 150), even as they fail to create an honors-exclusive classroom environment (Gee and Bleming 178). The article that most clearly describes the pedagogical benefits of contracts for both students and faculty appeared not in an NCHC publication, but in the journal *English Education*. In “Honoring All Learners: The Case for Embedded Honors in Heterogeneous English Language Arts Classrooms,” David Nurenberg articulates the value of adjusting assignments to students’ preparedness in heterogeneous English language arts classrooms. Nurenberg defines honors-embedded pedagogy as “a product that shows that a student delved more deeply into methodology, structure and/or theory; addressed more sophisticated questions; and satisfied more rigorous standards. [. . .] The content is either broader in scope or deeper in examination than in a comparable assignment” (65). He concludes that differentiated instruction serves all students equally and indiscriminately.

The characteristics of such honors-embedded learning echo the best practices recommended in honors teaching and learning, as described in Fuiks and Clark’s *Teaching and Learning in Honors*: connecting in-class learning with the world; applying self-directed learning approaches to assignments; engaging in metacognition,

critical thinking, and analysis; teaching one's peers; and participating in community-engaged learning. Done well, honors-embedded experiences such as honors contracts appear to be fruitful both for the students challenged at a higher level and the peers who benefit from interactions with stronger readers and writers. Fostering autonomy for all students in honors regardless of major, intersected identities, or status is the goal at KU, as elsewhere in honors education; an intentional practice of honors contracts is one of the means that the UHP has adopted to meet that goal. Patrick Bahls's recent essay in the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* values intentional honors contracts that create the "opportunity for students' self-guided intellectual growth" (175). In practice at KU, the initiative to create high-quality honors contracts has been inclusive in many more ways than initially anticipated.

The KU Honors Program supports 1,600 total students, and it admits into honors about 10% of every first-year incoming class at the institution. The vast majority of the students in the program are admitted to the UHP as first-year, first-time-enrolling students. The program has also always accepted transfer students, including both current KU students who are admitted during their first or second year and students transferring to KU from another institution. While the number of transfer students has increased over the past five years, that number remains relatively small (39 transfer students were accepted in fall 2017, a record number thus far). Transfer students balance the UHP's attrition rate and thus help to maintain the total number of honors students at KU. More significantly, during the past five years, the acceptance rate for underrepresented minority (URM) students has increased: while only 9.5% of students invited to join the honors program came from underrepresented groups before 2013, URM students represented 23.2% of invitations to honors in spring 2018. Despite the program's best efforts, however, the majority of admitted URM honors students do not ultimately matriculate on our campus. The UHP remains well below KU's institutional 12.27% of undergraduate students from underrepresented groups, with a mere 8.5%. A majority-white institution (official records show KU's student body

to be 77.4% white), KU boasts of more regional than ethnic or racial diversity. Accordingly, the UHP serves mostly Kansans, particularly from the Kansas City metropolitan area, as well as from small communities across Kansas; a recent university-wide push to increase the recruitment of out-of-state students led to a growing number of non-Kansans as well.

The honors curriculum at KU requires students to complete a first-year seminar, six courses totaling at least eighteen credit hours, and four enhanced learning experiences, representing exactly 15% of a student's KU degree (minimum 120 credit hours) and thus aligning (if barely) with the NCHC's "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program." To allow students to meet these requirements, the UHP offers 100 different honors courses every semester, most of which satisfy general education requirements and are delivered by departments in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Students may also satisfy honors course requirements by completing graduate coursework (700-level or above), up to two less commonly taught language courses, or up to two honors course contracts. Contracts are designed for 300-level (or above) courses that do not have an honors equivalent. Students earn as many honors credits as the contracted class is worth, with no requirement to enroll in supplementary hours.

Like many other honors programs and colleges, the UHP at KU has struggled to respond adequately to the increase in AP/college credits in conjunction, in our case, with an institutional decrease in general education requirements. In fall 2013, the UHP welcomed an incoming honors class of 400, an increase from 270 first-year students in fall 2012. Since then, the program has maintained that class size: 399 first-year students were admitted in fall 2019. This sustained growth called for some important changes that continue to be crucial today, including the introduction of digital advising tools to track student progress and the addition of honors courses to accommodate increased enrollment. During this early period of honors growth, KU also launched a new set of core requirements, reducing general education credits by 35 hours and transforming a broad liberal arts and sciences curriculum into a more skills-based

core of six main areas: critical thinking, oral and written communication, diversity, ethics, breadth of understanding, and depth of learning. Since the UHP had always met general education requirements with honors courses, we began restructuring to meet our expanded student body's needs.

A year later, in the wake of events in Ferguson in the summer of 2014, college campuses around the nation, starting with the University of Missouri, began to acknowledge and respond to student concerns about race and inclusion. At KU, two students, Elika and Isabella (all students' names have been changed to respect their privacy), broached the topic of honors inclusivity and equity with UHP staff, drawing attention to both our reputation on campus as an elitist unit and our responsibility to model equitability and inclusivity for KU students, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sex, national origin, ability, or sexual orientation. In response, UHP staff members offered training sessions to instructors to improve their cultural competency; the program also encouraged all faculty teaching honors courses to include a diversity statement in their syllabi and offered models of such statements.

Other curricular initiatives included an effort to make honors contracts as visible and inclusive as possible by engaging students in personalized conversations about their benefits. The vast majority of KU honors students talk with a UHP advisor about contracts to ensure that they understand the process well and are aware of their options. These meetings allow students to rehearse future conversations with faculty in a safe environment, and they enable advisors to set clear UHP expectations for contracts and to equip students with the necessary language to meet those expectations, an advantage Edgington explores more fully in Chapter Ten. Such contract advising has been particularly beneficial to KU honors students in majors like music and engineering, with notoriously challenging curricula; rather than losing these students to majors with many requirements, we show them how honors contract work fits into their academic requirements and individual goals. Our honors advisors are in the best position to gauge a student's understanding of faculty and institutional expectations, often referred to as the

“invisible syllabus,” and to explain and adapt each conversation to an individual student’s needs (Harris and Bensimon 80).

Honors began to make contracts more visible and accessible to all students in fall 2013. By fall 2014, we were encouraging honors students to take ownership of their own educations, making good use of honors contracts as well as other avenues for empowerment. KU offers two kinds of honors contracts: students or faculty can initiate contracts to enhance student learning in a non-honors course. In every case, contracts must meet a minimum of three learning outcomes focused on the development of specific skills (communication, research, analytical ability) to be approved by the honors program. Selected outcomes differ depending on fields of study; in STEM fields, for example, most students opt for research projects that demand creative or critical thought about course material by engaging them with more complex hypotheses and experiments, databases, or software than they would otherwise encounter in class. The student-initiated contract at KU is thus similar to contracts at many other institutions, as our submission form illustrates (see Appendix A): students interested in furthering their understanding of specific course material can earn honors credit in non-honors courses.

Collective course contracts were originally developed as a recruiting tool for faculty: from 2014 through spring 2017, UHP staff offered their support to individual faculty to develop collective contracts if their honors student enrollment exceeded seven (in any course, including, on occasion, an introductory course without an honors equivalent). If traditional honors contracts might seem to be a privilege reserved for an elite group of entitled students, as Badenhausen points out in his critique, collective contracts include students who may not be prepared to advocate for themselves in a collaborative project. It soon became evident to UHP administrators that collective contracts were far more than a mechanism to recruit faculty; they were a way to support honors students across a range of majors and schools. This initiative has been particularly successful in KU’s professional schools: the first collective contract was offered by Professor Douglas Ward in the School of Journalism

in a course entitled “Infomania.” An ongoing (as of fall 2019), creative approach to a required course, this group contract created a clear pathway for honors students through journalism requirements; it also promoted inclusivity of all majors in honors. It has also been particularly productive in the School of Engineering, where close to half of our students are earning degrees, but where few departments had offered honors courses until this initiative. Collective contracts have led to the creation of a number of collaborative engineering experiences for our honors students.

Collective contracts benefit honors students in many ways; it has been a priority for the UHP at KU to ensure that they also benefit faculty. The stated aim of contracts is to strengthen a student’s teamwork, creativity, research, leadership, oral communication (teaching or tutoring), and pre-professional skills, all while furthering the students’ learning in the discipline. (See Appendix B.) Often, however, contracts represent an added and uncompensated burden on faculty at KU. In recognition of this fact, the UHP has proposed a zero-credit-hour add-on course to mark an honors contract on student transcripts and to ensure an official record of directed honors contracts for faculty. Working closely in 2018 with our student enrollment management office and our registrar, we developed a fully integrated tracking system that allows for both recognition of faculty efforts and an upgrade to honors student transcripts, using institutionally available tools in the Perceptive Content system (formerly known as ImageNow).

But contracts also benefit faculty who engage fully with their students in this work. UHP administration has encouraged faculty to experiment with assignments that they may have never had the opportunity to integrate into their courses. For example, honors students in the aforementioned Infomania course became team leaders in charge of gathering, synthesizing, and presenting information in the most compelling way possible. Empowered honors students can help faculty in a number of ways: students engaging in honors contracts have assisted faculty by delivering information to the class, leading discussion, or supporting their peers in problem solving. One professor in the School of Music, for example, has asked his

contract students to contribute lesson plans that introduce different musical instruments to particular age ranges, thereby building a toolbox that he has then used regularly in his music teaching. The UHP's goal in discussing contracts with both students and faculty is to communicate that this work presents opportunities for creativity. Whether contracts allow honors-engaged work in a professional school without the enrollment to justify a standing honors course or to expand the range of content in other academic fields, they challenge students and faculty to consider ways in which they can collaborate productively and fruitfully.

Visibility of the UHP has increased because honors staff have worked closely with faculty to develop collective honors contracts. This process teaches faculty about the UHP and gives them a better understanding of honors opportunities for both their students and themselves. (Limited funds are available to support local experiences, for instance.) As of fall 2019, a number of faculty were in the habit of offering this opportunity to honors students instead of waiting to receive lists of eligible students from the UHP. Adding a prominent page of information about contracts to the UHP website also broadened and increased communication about the value of honors contracts. Because past honors administrations at KU avoided the topic of contracts, the addition of this webpage feature has been a rather drastic change. Between January 2016 and June 2019, the honors contract page was visited 2,815 times by unique viewers, making it one of the top 35 most visited of the roughly 200 pages on the honors website. Because of more intentional advising, traffic increased in spring 2018; by fall 2019, the contract page was the 25th most visited on the UHP website. The program also incorporated specific information about contracts into both orientation welcome messaging for new honors students and each subsequent stage of honors advising: students in honors consistently hear that they have four different options, one of which is the honors contract, to complete honors course requirements.

This intentional communication about honors contracts has led to a radical increase in the number of students engaged in them, from the mere eight whose work was recorded before 2013

to the 408 who submitted contract work between fall 2013 and early spring 2018. Of these 408 students, 111 engaged in collective contracts, and 297 contracted individually. Honors contracts are most popular in the School of Music (57 since 2013). Other professional schools report similarly high numbers: students in the School of Journalism (42), the School of Engineering (38), and the School of Architecture and Design (25) all take advantage of the contract option. Most other contracts are spread across disciplines in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The vast majority of students (222) developed only one honors contract during their time at KU, 50 students contracted in two courses, and the remaining 25 students contracted three or four times. All of the students who developed more than two honors contracts were majoring in the Schools of Engineering, Music, or Architecture and Design.

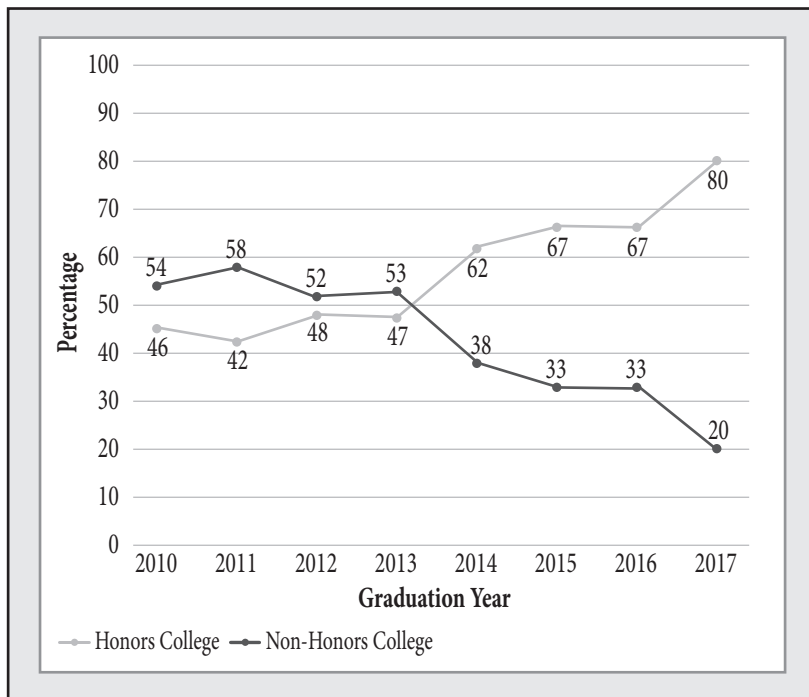
During the five years that the UHP has actively promoted contracts, the program has experienced a 13% increase in student completion of all honors requirements. Honors contracts are not solely responsible for this increase. While changes to advising strategy, for example, have also had an impact on completion, the number of honors contracts listed by students as a means to satisfy honors program requirements increased substantially over this period. In 2013, 4% of students submitting honors exit surveys indicated that they completed course contracts to fulfill honors requirements; in 2017, 16% of students completing their honors requirements employed contracts. This increase was gradual with a clear upward trend from 4% (2013) to 6% (2014) to 9% (2015) to 14% (2016) to 16% (2017); in other words, the average number of honors contracts between 2013 and 2017 increased from 7 to 45 per term.

In parallel, the UHP's completion numbers grew from 161 to 277 between 2013 and 2017. The number of transfer students completing all honors requirements has also increased by 33% since 2013, with a corresponding 33% decrease in the number of transfer students who chose not to complete honors requirements. (See Figure 1.) Forty of the 67 respondents to the survey described below claimed that without the option of honors contracts, they would not have been able to complete their degrees with honors. Within this

group, a majority of students reported that there were not enough upper-division honors courses available in their majors. Twenty-nine students suggested that curricular constraints and lack of time made contracts essential to their graduation with honors.

The UHP staff was generally aware that the intentional use of honors contracts could raise graduation rates, but the program had never made a systematic attempt to understand the specific benefits of contracts for many honors students. To that end, in spring 2018, the UHP surveyed all students who completed an honors contract over the past five years as part of a broader series of surveys meant to evaluate student satisfaction with all UHP programming. Of the 408 students who completed honors contracts during this five-year period, 167 were still active KU students in good standing with the UHP at the time of the survey's distribution. Of the 408, 275 were women, and 32 identified with a non-white ethnic and/or racial identity, including Hispanic, African American, and Asian

FIGURE 1. CURRENT/TRANSFER COMPLETION 2010–2017



American. These 408 students represent a cross-section of the honors student body, from first-year students to seniors. Only 67 of these 408 students (16.5%) chose to respond to the anonymous survey sent in early March 2018. Due to invalid email addresses for many graduated students, however, the survey response rate was actually closer to 30% of those who received the survey, a statistically significant number. Of the 67 respondents, 36 majored or were majoring in professional schools, and 31 earned degrees in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. A vast majority of contracts (42) were developed by students in their field of study. In other cases, students sought to enhance learning in a general education course above the 300 level. A few contracts did not serve to complete honors requirements; in these cases, students were simply interested in furthering their understanding of a particular course's material, and the contract offered them just the support and structure they needed to achieve that goal.

While the survey focused in a controlled fashion on both the constraints and benefits of contracts, the follow-up conversations scheduled with 22 of the respondents sought to broaden programmatic understanding of honors students' contract experiences and to identify whether they perceived contracts as an important part of honors inclusivity. Despite efforts to diversify the respondent pool, all 22 respondents were women. The interviews were partially structured: in all cases, honors staff asked the same five questions to create a consistent data set, although the order of the questions varied, following rather than scripting the natural flow of conversation. I do not believe that this fluid structure influenced student responses in a way that might invalidate the findings described below. The following case studies represent some of the most salient examples from the pool of interview responses.

Mattea, Kosha, and Lucy, our first three case studies, were each introduced to a different collective honors contract by the instructor of an honors-enhanced course. None of them would have taken the steps to engage in a contract on their own had the opportunity not been offered. All of them, however, enjoyed significant unexpected benefits from their experiences. Mattea enjoyed the opportunity to

begin research, critical thinking, and analysis in a field that would eventually become her major. As an openly gay African American woman interested in the field of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, she needed both a structured way of engaging critically with the canonical works presented in many of her classes and a clear understanding that her disruption of that narrative was both encouraged and expected in her future major. Her growing frustration with regular coursework found a productive outlet in the honors-enhanced research project that she designed following the invitation of the instructor in one of her courses. This contract gave Mattea the tools to find her place in a field of study that she did not immediately recognize as a good fit.

Kosha's experience was with a collective honors contract in a course satisfying a requirement for her psychology minor. Kosha acknowledged that she entered into the honors contract for transactional reasons: to earn honors credits necessary for the completion of her degree. The nature of her contract project and the relationship she developed with her faculty mentor, however, led her to join a psychology research lab, an experience seldom available to students outside the major. When asked which skills her honors contract developed, she pointed to three key professional skills for a STEM student: the ability to synthesize knowledge, the capacity to construct a scientific poster, and the confidence to advocate for herself. Kosha's path into complex scientific research is unusual, but the track from honors contract to independent lab work to thesis is often followed by students who need some scaffolding within undergraduate research, in both STEM and other fields. Honors contracts allow students to experience research before their senior capstone course sequence, thus encouraging an increasing number of honors students to complete departmental honors at KU, a kind of scaffolding discussed in more detail in Ticknor and Khan's essay in this volume. At KU, the Department of Philosophy considered making the honors contract a required step toward completion of the honors thesis because contracts allow students to refine analytical skills and thus to enhance the quality of their capstone performance.

Lucy, our third case study, was a civil engineering major who opted for an enhanced honors version of Theater as Performance, a course that met the oral communication general education requirement. Enhancing this course meant attending talks by scholars from various disciplines and analyzing their public communication skills using tools learned in class. This assignment forced Lucy out of her comfort zone by asking her not only to engage habitually in informal conversation with faculty but also to do so on topics well outside her areas of expertise. Fulfilling this contract gave Lucy the skills to advocate for herself and to develop intentional relationships with faculty. As one of only twenty-two female students in her graduating honors engineering cohort of sixty, she noted that the honors contract equipped her with the tools both to assert herself in a masculine environment and to take on future leadership roles in her discipline. In our conversation, Lucy repeatedly connected the close rapport she developed with her contract mentor early in her college career with her ability to advocate for herself in engineering courses later. She became the captain of the competitive steel bridge team and was offered a permanent position after interning with an engineering firm the summer before graduation. Lucy credited the honors contract's gentle push to move beyond her comfort zone with many of her future successes at KU. The contract empowered her to take full ownership of her engineering education and to affirm herself first at KU and then in her profession, a benefit that Hageman explores further in Chapter Four.

While the three case studies above highlight the experience of students engaged in collective honors contracts, the four below focus on individual student-initiated projects. For some students, the decision to pursue an honors contract is financial. For example, as a Spanish major on a pre-medical track who self-finances her education with both work and loans, Megan discovered at the end of one fall semester that she had not budgeted enough to cover tuition for her final semester on campus. While she had planned for all of her major requirements, she forgot her final honors course requirement. Asking her parents for the needed \$1,000 would put additional financial strain on her already burdened family. The

honors contract was the only way for her to complete her degree with University Honors. Another Spanish major, Cecilia, started at a nearby community college. On the basis of her past experience, she fully expected honors contracts to be available. As an incoming junior, she was counting on contracts to enable her to complete her degree with University Honors, a feat she would not otherwise be able to achieve. Although her engagement with honors contracts was originally purely utilitarian, her honors-enhanced assignment launched a successful research project that she then developed the following summer as a McNair Scholar. Like most of the other students described above, Cecilia maximized her engagement in many areas of her education by making good use of the honors contract, thereby taking charge of her KU experience and finding her place at the university more effectively.

For some students, honors contracts offer a means of connecting their various academic interests in thoughtful ways that lead to concrete outcomes. Edith's case illustrates this idea quite clearly: while the requirements for her two areas of emphasis (a major in music performance and a minor in creative writing) did not overlap, they connected in her honors contract, which involved writing and performing lyrics to accompany a friend's original music. Her contract gave her a formal framework for approaching a faculty member, articulating connections between her two disciplines, and earning credit for the work she might otherwise not have had the opportunity to complete. Conversely, Ananda did not need contract credit to finish her degree with honors, but she eagerly took the opportunity to explore legal issues with an honors contract because she was considering the pursuit of a law degree. Ultimately, the focus of the honors contract on specific legal work clarified for her that this professional path was not a good fit. She finished the contract grateful for the chance to adjust her future career plans.

The support that contracts can offer students seems to suggest that they might be an inclusive pedagogical strategy. Indeed, a majority of respondents (36 of these 67) indicated in response to a direct question that the contract experience was "inclusive," although the survey did not ask them to define the term further. Students

repeatedly used the open-response field, however, to describe in more detail the positive contract experiences that led to this feeling of inclusivity. Perhaps most important for respondents was the ability to “foster a relationship” with the professor. Forty-eight students reported not having known the professor before completing their contracts, yet 34 described these faculty as their “mentors.” When prompted to reflect on how this relationship developed, students cited the time spent with the faculty member discussing the contract project itself, as opposed to talking about research in general, for instance. The focused nature of these conversations made the interaction with faculty safe and clear for students: the contract thus worked as an important pathway to mentorship. This is not to minimize the deepening of students’ learning in the course but to emphasize the value to students of developing a mentoring relationship with a professor, a benefit explored in depth by Snyder and Weisberg in Chapter Seven. Even students who elected not to contract within their majors highlighted the value of relationships with faculty whom they otherwise “would not have sought out.” Substantially, 33% of students reported that the faculty who mentored them through their honors contracts would write or had written letters of recommendation for them.

The open-ended and encouraging nature of the follow-up interviews allowed students to share their thoughts and feelings casually and in more detail. This approach led to a number of unexpected findings, including information about students’ financial concerns. Most students acknowledged that because contracts were tied to existing credits already in their schedules, this form of honors work allowed them to 1) stay within the recommended limit of 15 credit hours per semester, 2) manage their time better, and 3) avoid out-of-pocket expenses for courses exceeding their scholarship coverage, a problem that Wyatt addresses in Chapter Nine. These KU honors students were primarily concerned with their potential inability to complete their degrees with honors. Close to half (45%) of the interviewees affirmed that financial constraints shaped their decisions to opt for honors contracts. In a different environment, financial constraints might play an even greater motivating role in

students' decisions to complete honors contracts. It is striking that half of the students interviewed considered the financial benefits of contracts to be important, particularly since the survey alone would not have revealed this view. Attending to such concerns is crucial to honors educators seeking to create an inclusive community for students.

In addition to such financial concerns, honors contracts address key aspects of pedagogical best practices in honors education and do so while fostering inclusion. At KU, all students completing an honors contract between 2013 and 2019 applied self-directed learning approaches to their assignments and taught their peers. The seven case studies above show how our students have also connected in-class learning with the world; engaged in metacognition, critical thinking, and analysis; and participated in community-engaged learning. Interviews with students revealed that the three key learning outcomes of honors contracts at KU are an increased awareness of their own learning process and skills, the development of pre-professional competencies, and the practice of research. In the process of meeting these outcomes, students have become empowered to take ownership of their education and thus to overcome a range of social and structural barriers. Contracts that empower all students to achieve these goals are certainly inclusive, as our survey has suggested they were.

Significantly, the most important take-away from the analysis of the students' feedback was not expressly planned or anticipated. Beyond the various skills they mastered, students frequently credited their honors contracts with a growing sense of responsibility for their own learning, an ability to take the initiative in that learning, and a strong feeling of controlling their own education. Students almost unanimously reported that the contract process "made me feel more empowered as a student" because "it was *my* class." Students also described an enhanced sense of agency in their learning; by developing rapport with one faculty mentor, students felt confident in their ability to do so again, whether or not they did so within the honors contract structure. One student went so far as to say that she was emboldened to advocate for herself and her peers

on campus after completing her contract. The clear pattern in student comments is that contracts allowed them to “create their own honors experience,” regardless of discipline, and that this creative educational act added personal and professional value for them.

Students credited the structure of the honors contract, in particular, with their growing sense of autonomy. Developing student autonomy is an important outcome of honors education, one that may be achieved in different ways, including active learning pedagogies (Fuiks and Gillison 102). Fostering autonomy for *all* students in honors, however, is often a challenge. Although students whose parents have attended college may be coached to connect and network with professors, not all honors students know how to advocate for themselves. Honors contracts can democratize this kind of knowledge by empowering all students equitably. Contracts create a framework in which students can approach faculty safely, with a reason for meeting, a set of clear steps for project completion, and a calendar for subsequent meetings to support and develop the student’s project. For first-generation or other students who might feel out of place at a research university, honors contracts offer a loose script to follow. Because contracts do not assume cultural know-how and confidence in approaching faculty, students from all backgrounds are empowered to speak up and affirm their place at the university. Honors contracts can potentially give all students the license to express interest in a topic and specialize in it for the duration of the term. An honors contract can allow first-generation students to “reach higher by digging deeper,” as one of our respondents put it, in ways that most might hope for but not pursue for fear of the unknown.

Making contracts more accessible to all students, in turn, makes honors programs and colleges more visible to faculty from a range of disciplines across campus. Between 2013 and 2018, the number of faculty participating in honors contracts at KU grew from 8 to 200, spanning 58 disciplines in 10 KU schools and colleges. While some faculty were clearly favored because of the courses they taught or the reputation they built through the years, the program saw an increase in mentoring by faculty who had not previously

worked with honors students. These connections have benefitted both the UHP and its students: the more the UHP engaged faculty in the sciences, professional fields, arts, humanities, and social sciences across the university, the more likely those faculty were to refer a diverse range of students to the program. Furthermore, because faculty have witnessed the work of honors staff in support of all students' empowerment, autonomy, and success, they were more likely to encourage a broad cross-section of students to apply to the honors program.

In making honors contracts more visible, the UHP expected completion rates to improve and hoped that transfer students and students in professional schools might be more likely to complete honors requirements. Such improvements in retention and completion make clear the honors program's commitment to answer the needs of all students. UHP staff did not anticipate, however, that honors contracts would also provide such a fundamentally empowering experience to students as they developed essential honors competencies: research skills, critical thinking, and autonomy, in particular. An understanding of how the structured format of honors contracts helps all students to see and master the invisible curriculum of the research university suggests the value of assessing further how best to develop self-advocacy, autonomy, and agency in honors students. Although honors contracts, of course, are only one of many ways to achieve these goals, collecting demographic information and assessing how the scaffolding of honors contracts does—or does not—create access to faculty mentors and research experiences for students with marginalized identities might be useful. Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* claims that "access is pedagogy" (109). Honors contracts are far more than a stopgap: they are also a means for creating honors programs and colleges that are more equitable and inclusive. Honors contracts are a pedagogy of access.

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Address correspondence to Anne Dotter at
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APPENDIX A

**University of Kansas
Online Honors Course Contract Form**

GENERAL INFORMATION

Thank you for your interest in pursuing an Honors Course Contract. **Prior to submitting this form**, please be sure to communicate with the course instructor regarding their expectations for completion.

This form should be submitted no later than the 20th day of the semester in which the course is offered.

Student Name _____

Student ID _____

Student Email _____

I expect to graduate this semester

- Yes No

Select the current semester then choose a course from the list of courses.

Course Semester _____

Course Number _____

Course Term _____

Instructor Name _____

Instructor KU Email _____

- My contract is with a different instructor for this course.

Please use the attachments button below to upload a copy of the course syllabus.

Honors Contract Requirements

In addition to the course requirements outlined in the syllabus, please specify what you will be doing to enhance your learning experience in this course.

BENCHMARKS

Identify the tasks that you will be accomplishing as you move toward completing your project, including a tentative schedule. Be sure to include any product, such as a paper, creative work, or presentation that you will complete by the end of the semester.

Example Benchmarks: Identify six articles to read, successfully develop a question on the basis of the extra reading, administer a survey, submit a proposal to present at Undergraduate Research Symposium, turn in the first draft of a final paper or of a lecture to be given to the class, etc.

Target Completion Date (mm/dd/yyyy) _____

Benchmark 1 _____

Target Completion Date (mm/dd/yyyy) _____

Benchmark 2 _____

Target Completion Date (mm/dd/yyyy) _____

Benchmark 3 _____

Target Completion Date (mm/dd/yyyy) _____

Benchmark 4 _____

Target Completion Date (mm/dd/yyyy) _____

Benchmark 5 _____

When possible, a student will be asked to contribute to class discussion and lectures on the basis of their extra learning. How will you give back to your class through the contract?

GOALS AND OUTCOMES

By engaging in this Honors Contract, you should work to achieve the Outcomes below (skills, knowledge, professional development, etc.):

- Examples of Practical Skills: Can identify relevant sources from library databases. Can successfully use Final Cut Pro to edit my film.

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- Examples of Scholarly Skills: Be able to compare/contrast three different scholars' interpretations of *Brave New World*. Be able to summarize the latest research about the causes of depression among the elderly.
- Examples of Professional Development: Attend a professional conference. Create a writing sample/portfolio for graduate school applications. Give a lecture to my peers in class.

Outcome 1 _____

Outcome 2 _____

Outcome 3 _____

Outcome 4 _____

Outcome 5 _____

If you require assistance completing this form, please contact your Honors advisor or the Honors Program Office (785-864-4225) or honors@ku.edu.

Click the submit button below to submit your proposal.

APPENDIX B

Collective Honors Contracts

Description: While Honors Course Contracts generally promote an individual student's initiative, leadership, and self-directed learning, the Collective Honors Contract is made to foster honors students' teamwork skills, creativity, research skills, leadership, oral communication (teaching/tutoring), specific pre-professional skills, and more, as appropriate, all while furthering the students' learning in the discipline. Collective Contracts can be student-driven, but they will more often than not be faculty- or Honors Program-driven projects, affording flexibility in developing honors experiences in area studies where they are rare or where there may not be the critical mass of honors students to justify an honors course.

To reflect the different objectives of the Collective Honors Contract, the faculty member is responsible for submitting the syllabus/scaffolded assignment(s) describing the project to be completed by the students.

Expectations: Honors students engaged in an Honors Collective Contract must

- earn a minimum course grade of "B" in the regular course (additional honors requirements are not considered extra credit toward a final minimum course grade), and
- fulfill the honors requirements as described in the Collective Honors Contract.

Project/Assignment(s): Honors Collective Contracts will vary greatly depending on the discipline in which they are developed. Ideally, the project developed by students under faculty mentorship will complement the students' learning in the course and foster skills beyond the scope of the regular course. Examples of Collective Honors Contracts include, but are by no means limited to, the following examples:

- Collective Honors Contracts can foster students' professional skills, leading them to engage in a teamwork-development project along the lines of work they will be expected to complete in the professional world.
- A small group of honors students engaged in a project to further their research or creative problem-solving skills on a topic related to the course content might be invited to share their findings with the group. This work could be completed through discussion-leading, a lecture-type presentation or presentations, or a sustained tutoring experience for students who may be struggling in the course.

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Benefits: Echoing the experiences students will have in honors courses, faculty can draw input from honors students on pedagogical choices or development of course content. Encouraging honors students to learn from one another as they develop their project, the faculty member can test different types of assignments that might, down the line, be meaningfully integrated in the course for all students.