

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Ensuring a Quality Honors Experience through Learning Contracts: Success beyond Our Wildest Dreams

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In 1997, when Julia A. Haseleu started teaching at Kirkwood Community College (KCC) in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, her charge as a psychology instructor with honors experience was to develop an honors program based on learning contracts. Other faculty and administrators had attempted to offer honors courses at KCC, but these efforts had failed. Rhonda Kekke, KCC Dean of Arts and Humanities, determined that the problem was the honors course format. At small to medium-sized colleges and universities, especially two-year campuses, finding a group of honors students who are interested in the same subjects, able to work the same courses into their schedules, and synchronized enough across courses to justify a full honors curriculum in any given semester is often difficult. Kekke was convinced that it would be better to use an honors

project format, and she was right. Now, twenty years later, Haseleu has developed two such programs at two flagship two-year colleges in two midwestern states: first at KCC and then at her current institution, Madison College in Madison, Wisconsin.

In Chapter One of this volume, Richard Badenhause outlines and discusses the problems and pitfalls of using learning contracts, especially as “add-ons” to non-honors courses or in lieu of formal honors classes. Badenhause comes from the perspective of one who leads a “fully developed and flexible stand-alone honors curriculum” (6), an environment in which learning contracts understandably would not be the first choice—or even necessary—as a way of developing an honors curriculum. In smaller programs, however, with a much wider variety of departments, programs, and disciplines (e.g., liberal arts, automotive technology, dental hygiene, business and marketing, construction, culinary arts, engineering, protective services, graphic design, information technology, music, nursing, welding, and veterinary technician), offering an ongoing course-based honors curriculum is often not possible. In such cases, a project-based approach that is structured with comprehensive learning contracts is a flexible way to give students honors-level learning experiences in lieu of honors classes. This situation existed at both KCC and Madison College.

In project-based learning, students develop a question to explore and are guided through the research and analysis process under the supervision of a faculty member. Project-based learning is neither a supplemental activity nor an “add-on” to a traditional course. Rather, it is the basis of the curriculum in and of itself (Bell 39). Students who engage in project-based learning experience a deeper level of learning and understanding about a topic and enjoy greater opportunity to hone problem-solving and critical-thinking skills than they would in a more passive learning environment.

Active learning only occurs, of course, in well-designed projects. Kokotsaki, Menzies, and Wiggins have reviewed the project-based learning literature and made several recommendations for effective project-based learning, including not only that students must be guided and supported effectively, but also that evidence of student

progress must be regularly monitored and assessed (267–77). These key factors, along with mechanisms to ensure that students experience the same quality and intellectual rigor in their project-based learning as in more traditional honors courses, can easily be introduced via quality-assurance mechanisms included in learning contracts. As Theresa A. James states in her seminal work, *A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges* (2006), “In disciplines that do not offer honors sections—or when there are too few students for a class to make—the honors contract can accommodate the individual student who needs or desires honors credit” (30).

“By definition,” according to Badenhausen, honors contracts are “ad hoc arrangements, and consequently, they operate outside conventional curricular checks and balances that seek to ensure quality in a student’s learning experience” (13). In his recent work, Bahls also discusses the hesitance of some faculty members and administrators to employ learning contracts because “contracts may lead to a dilution of the academic or intellectual rigor one would expect to find in an honors-designated course section” (172). Countering some of these arguments against learning contracts, this chapter makes the case for learning contracts based on some of the honors program successes as well as the learning opportunities that Haseleu has experienced at Madison College. We argue that building specific quality-assurance mechanisms into learning contracts can mitigate any potential loss of intellectual rigor and provide the same or similar checks and balances as those structured into more “traditional” honors courses (Bahls 173; Gaffney-Rhys and Jones 711–25). Students can and should be encouraged to discover the academic value and benefits of this form of honors project-based learning.

## **MADISON COLLEGE HONORS PROGRAM OVERVIEW**

Madison College is a comprehensive community college with eight regional campuses that serve the southcentral district in Wisconsin. Each year, the college enrolls approximately 35,000 students, which translates into roughly 9,000 FTEs across the district (“2016–2017 Enrollment”; “2015–2016 Academic”). Honors at

Madison College is a college-wide, project-based program designed to provide an enriching educational experience for students who have demonstrated academic excellence and who seek challenging opportunities beyond the standard curriculum. Some institutions choose to supplement their honors curricula with honors contracts linked to specific non-honors courses, allowing students to delve more deeply into course content by completing alternative projects or assignments related to the course. (See Bahls and DiLauro, Meyers, and Guertin.) Although honors project credits are offered in each of the participating departments, programs, and disciplines at Madison College, the honors projects themselves are stand-alone academic offerings and are not linked to other courses. These honors projects comprise the entirety of Madison College's honors curriculum.

Qualified students work with an honors supervising faculty member over the course of a semester to develop a two- or three-credit honors project in the faculty member's discipline. Since the launch of the honors program in 2014, we have trained 286 honors faculty members and have had 610 students participate in the program. Our faculty and students come from 80 different departments, programs, and disciplines (approximately 75% of the programs eligible to offer honors credits). Students can participate in the honors program if they have earned a 3.5 or higher cumulative GPA and have completed at least 12 degree credits at Madison College, or if they are incoming high school students with a cumulative GPA of 3.5 or higher and a letter of recommendation from a high school teacher or guidance counselor.

## **LEARNING CONTRACT QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS**

Based on Haseleu's success with learning contracts in the KCC Honors Program, she proposed their introduction at Madison College. In developing the format and content of these contracts, the Honors Initiative Committee, composed of faculty and administrators from across disciplines, spent most of a year meeting with key stakeholders, including faculty, staff, and administrators from different departments, programs, and disciplines; staff from the

student services, enrollment, and advising areas; and union officers. We discussed what the honors program would need to include in the learning contract to provide the necessary framework for educational experiences that met the academic standards set forth by the Wisconsin Technical College System. In addition, we agreed on the importance of designing a learning contract flexible enough to accommodate a variety of departments, programs, and disciplines and to account for projects based in STEM fields, the social sciences, the humanities, business, health, and several career and technical programs.

Much has been written about learning contracts as faculty-student agreements that mediate expectations, learning objectives, and methods of assessment. (See in particular Bolch; Bone; Goodman and Beenen; Klimoski; Lemieux; and MacDonald.) Using this research as a baseline, we developed our learning contract framework in much the same way one would design a course. For example, in his review of principles for effective course design, Whetten first identifies characteristics that foster learning and then emphasizes the importance of aligning those characteristics to produce coherent and complete learning experiences for students (339–57). Below we connect each of these characteristics to our requirements for contracted honors projects:

- **Activities Fostering Active, Engaged Learning:** The honors project must be of interest and personally relevant to the student. As the subject-matter expert, the supervising faculty member provides guidance and mentorship, but the student is the active learner who completes all facets of the project.
- **Explicit Learning Objectives:** Supervising faculty members must clearly specify what they expect students to learn and what students should be able to do upon completion of the honors project. The faculty member and student also should agree upon the final product of the project.
- **Valid Assessment of Student Learning:** Supervising faculty members should use appropriate measures to determine whether the learning objectives were achieved. Measures

should correspond to the skillset learned and the final product produced.

Similarly, in discussing the development of learning contracts, Daniela Brecko considers many of the same characteristics, adding the following two elements, once again connected to our requirements for contracted honors projects (257–71):

- **Relevant Learning Need:** The supervising faculty member and student should mutually determine what the student wants to learn, could learn, and should learn.
- **Useful Resources and Strategies for Learning:** The supervising faculty member should help the student identify and secure the necessary resources to complete the honors project. The faculty member and student must also articulate specific activities, such as weekly meetings, to facilitate learning and project completion.

The Madison College Honors Project Learning Contract form, included in the Appendix, illustrates how we incorporated each of these course- and contract-design characteristics to ensure high-quality learning experiences and outstanding honors projects. Each contract requires eleven key pieces of information that collectively define the honors project, including what will be accomplished, when it will be accomplished, what the learning objectives are and how they will be measured, and what the final outcome and product will be. These key components of the learning contract are required for all projects regardless of the department, program, or discipline in which they are based. The components of our contracts are described in further detail below.

## Number of Credits

Honors students may enroll in two or three honors project credits per learning contract, and the number of honors credits taken by the student must be specified on the contract. Students may enroll in more than one honors project within a single semester, and they may also enroll in projects in more than one discipline. To graduate

with honors, students must complete between four and six honors project credits (two or three distinct projects) with a minimum AB average grade. Students can enroll in up to six honors project credits total during their time at Madison College. The credits will count toward the student's degree if the student earns a passing grade on the honors project. In order for the credits to count toward the completion of the honors program, however, the student must earn an AB average across all completed honors projects.

We also indicate on the Honors Project Learning Contract that each honors credit requires approximately 51 hours of work, a guideline we received from the Wisconsin Technical College System. The FAQs that we regularly distribute to students and faculty explain this requirement in more detail. By specifying the number of credits taken, we give the student a clear idea of the amount of work expected. These credits also guide the design of the honors project itself by clarifying the scope of the project.

## **Project Start and Completion Dates**

Also on the learning contract, specific dates define a concrete timeline, allowing the student and supervising faculty member to create a more detailed project work plan with dates for milestones and benchmarks to be achieved on the way to project completion. As proposed by Dilauro, Meyers, and Guertin, an honors project can span multiple semesters as long as the work each semester results in a product that can be graded as a stand-alone section of the larger project (109–15). A separate learning contract must be submitted each semester for each section of a multi-semester project.

## **Project Description**

The brief project description and learning contract title appear on official college documents such as enrollment forms and transcripts. A longer, one-page description of the project may also be included. These descriptions allow the honors director, honors advisory committee, and deans to review the proposed honors project for alignment with the college mission and vision, the student's

educational program plan, and the Wisconsin Technical College System standards.

## **Eligibility for Honors Project**

This section asks the student and supervising faculty member to verify the student's eligibility to participate in the honors program. The honors supervising faculty member and the honors director check eligibility to ensure that only qualified students participate in the program and earn honors credits.

## **Learning Objectives**

After consulting with the student about the proposed project, the supervising faculty member determines appropriate learning objectives, based not only on what the student wants to gain from the project, but also on what the student could or should learn from completing such a project. The learning objectives are often driven by the final goals of the project, such as developing specific skills, increasing knowledge of a topic, or finding solutions to real-world problems of interest to the student. This section is one of the most important on the learning contract since it clearly delineates what the faculty mentor expects of the student, what the student will achieve, and what specifically the student's educational experience will entail.

## **Criteria for Evaluating the Honors Project**

The criteria for evaluating the honors project and the methods of assessment must correspond directly to the learning objectives and align with the skills and knowledge to be gained. This section indicates the project's final outcome or product, and the supervising faculty member describes the parts of the project to be graded and the percentage of the overall grade determined by each part. Supervising faculty members are encouraged to include a copy of the grading rubric to be used, if applicable, and must use an A-to-F grading scale. The honors supervising faculty member is solely responsible for determining whether the honors student has met



the honors learning objectives and outcomes outlined in the learning contract and for assigning a final grade.

### **Required Meetings, Conferences, or Other Activities**

Using the brief list of required activities in this section as a guide, all supervising faculty members and their students must meet weekly to keep the student on track and to ensure the supervising faculty member's ongoing assessment and review of the project.

### **Textbooks and Other Required Materials**

This section lists resources that the student needs to complete the project. Some resources may be available on campus at no cost. When students indicate on their contracts a need for resources, such as supplies, materials, or equipment, that are unavailable on campus, the honors director or supervising faculty member directs them to an application for a small materials scholarship that is available through the Madison College Honors Program.

### **Honors Projects Requiring Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval**

To ensure that we follow federal guidelines regarding research involving human or animal subjects, we have developed a process in collaboration with the Madison College IRB for honors projects requiring such approval. Students indicate on the learning contract whether their project involves human or animal subjects. For those projects involving data collection with human subjects, the student must first spend one semester completing a literature review on the topic and developing the research materials, such as interview questions and an informed consent form. In the subsequent semester, the student may collect data. The learning contract includes a section requiring students to certify that they have completed the preliminary literature review; they must also include copies of the research materials they produced as part of their first-semester project (e.g., surveys, instructions to participants, and planned methods for analyzing results). To ensure faculty expertise

in overseeing research involving human subjects or animals, the supervising faculty member must include a completed checklist of faculty research experience with the learning contract.

The honors faculty committee reviews the learning contract as well as all IRB-related materials submitted with the contract and is responsible for approving the learning contract itself. Upon approval, the honors director forwards the learning contract and research materials to the IRB committee for review. The honors committee defers to the IRB for final approval of the research and required materials for projects involving human subjects. Once the student earns both levels of approval, the research itself may begin. Honors projects involving human subjects are always conducted under the ongoing oversight of the IRB committee.

## **Required Certifications**

All honors students are required to submit a copy of their final honors project to the director at the end of the semester, and all learning contracts ask students and faculty to certify their understanding of this requirement. This certification not only ensures completion of the work, but it also verifies the grading and approval of the final product by the supervising faculty member. The learning contract is retained by the honors program as a permanent record for students, faculty, the honors program, the college, and the Wisconsin Technical College System.

## **Required Signatures**

In keeping with the principles outlined in Theresa A. James's *A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges*, we require signatures on all learning contracts by the student, supervising faculty member, the faculty member's dean, and the honors program director (79–108). This process ensures complete oversight and approval of the project and contract as proposed. If any signing party has questions or concerns about the project or contract, that person may send it back to the supervising faculty member and student to revise. Once all parties have signed the learning contract,

it is sent to the honors committee for review and approval. Students cannot begin working on their projects until they earn honors committee approval.

## **OTHER QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS RELATED TO THE LEARNING CONTRACT**

To support the specific quality-assurance mechanisms built into our honors learning contracts, the Madison College Honors Program has developed three key initiatives, described in more detail below: honors faculty training workshops, honors faculty stipends, and an honors competition where students present their honors projects.

### **Honors Faculty Workshops**

All full- and part-time faculty interested in serving as honors supervising faculty members must first complete an honors faculty workshop. These four-hour workshops cover a variety of topics, including the history of honors programs, the benefits of student participation in honors, the strategies for recruiting and supervising honors students, the process of developing an honors project, and the requirements for completing all sections of a learning contract. By providing comprehensive training to supervising faculty members, which includes detailed instructions on how to complete a learning contract as well as a sample learning contract for their reference, we ensure that our students' project-based honors educational experiences will be of the same caliber, quality, and intellectual rigor as traditional honors courses. Although faculty are not compensated for attending the workshop, completion of the workshop does count toward their licensure and required professional development training.

## **Faculty Stipends**

The Madison College Honors Program pays supervising faculty members a stipend of \$500 for each honors student supervised, regardless of the number of honors project credits in which the student is enrolled. The honors faculty member can supervise up to three students per semester. The stipend amounts are equal across all departments, programs, disciplines, and faculty ranks (including both full- and part-time faculty) to promote equity among supervising faculty members.

## **Honors Competition**

Our honors program holds an Honors Competition event at the end of each fall and spring semester. Students can present their honors projects to members of the Madison College community and a panel of judges, which includes faculty, staff, and administrators from across the college. The first-, second-, and third-place winners receive a trophy, cash award, and financial support to present their honors projects at the next Upper-Midwest Regional Honors Council Conference. Many supervising faculty members incorporate this competitive event into their evaluation criteria on the learning contract. In such cases, participation in the competition is one of the final products the students must complete to meet their learning objectives. In discussing one of the drawbacks of learning contracts, Badenhausen argues: “We do our students no favors by establishing curricular practices that separate them from their honors peers . . .” (10). By holding an honors competition each semester, however, we provide our students with an important venue for networking with faculty, receiving feedback on their projects, and interacting with other honors students who share their project-based experience.

## **IMPACT OF LEARNING CONTRACTS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

The decision to develop a project-based honors curriculum at Madison College meant that from the start we needed a detailed

learning contract framework for the projects, thoughtful supervision and evaluation by faculty, and a process to ensure a high-quality educational experience for honors students. By designing contracts in much the same way as one would design a traditional honors course, we were able to verify that the students and supervising faculty members had a mutual and clear understanding of what the project would entail, what was expected of the student and faculty member, and what the project outcomes would be. In addition, we created some checks and balances to ensure that the student's project-based honors educational experience was of the same caliber, quality, and intellectual rigor as other traditional coursework taken at Madison College.

For the most part, the learning contracts have been viewed positively by those participating in the honors program, with approximately 96% of students and faculty responding to a bi-annual survey rating the experience as "very useful." Comments from the supervising faculty members focus on the value of contracts in producing clear learning outcomes and careful oversight. One professor, for example, remarks, "It is extremely important to document the expectations and outcomes to ensure the criteria are met. This offers a process to mentor students [and] to keep them focused and working toward a specified set of goals and expectations." Another sees the learning contract as protection against potential problems: "It is good to have the contract as it is a great guideline to abide by. I have never experienced any abuses throughout my two honors project experiences, but I can see how the contract may mitigate against such an abuse." A third sees the contract as a useful starting point for mentoring: "I feel that the learning contract gives both the student and the advisor a foundation to build the project. The student can refer to the contract for the grading expectations, the depth of the project, and the timeline." In each case, mentors valued the rigor and format of our process.

In addition to these positive responses, another measure of the success and impact of our learning-contract process has been the caliber and outcomes of the honors students' projects and the directions in which these projects ultimately took them. For instance, a

mathematics honors student received a scholarship and was admitted as a full-time student in chemical engineering at Yale University, in part because of his published honors project. An honors student studying electronics created an electronic weather relay device that recorded the coldest temperatures ever documented on earth; this device was later installed in weather stations in Antarctica by his supervising faculty member. As a follow-up, the student created a second version of his device and recently traveled to Antarctica himself to install it at the weather stations. An engineering honors student was selected to attend a workshop at Langley Air Force Base for students interested in an internship at NASA. A student in the Gender and Women's Studies program presented her honors research on women in Zimbabwe at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women 61: Women's Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work. Several other honors students have presented their work at professional conferences or had their work published in peer-reviewed professional journals.

Students contribute not only to their global and national communities but also to the local community through their work. One economics honors student conducted research on which buses were the most cost-effective and environmentally responsive and then presented his findings to the Madison mayor and his staff. A business management student received the Outreach Organization of the Year award for Transliberation Art Coalition, an organization he created to heighten visibility and to empower members of the transgender and gender-nonconforming community as part of his honors project. The success of these projects has helped many of our honors students to secure full-time employment, scholarships, or internships.

Based on our experience at Madison College, we see four key advantages to learning contracts. First, they are adaptable to a wide variety of disciplines and project types. With eighty participating departments, programs, and disciplines, we needed a tool to accommodate the varied academic, professional, and creative goals of our students and faculty. Second, contracts require the supervising faculty member and student to think through the project thoroughly

before beginning work. By establishing logistics, expectations, outcomes, and the timeline of the project beforehand, students are more likely to succeed and have higher quality, more meaningful educational experiences with clearly defined and useful outcomes. Third, the learning contract serves as the official documentation initiating the student's enrollment process into the honors program. Upon submission to the honors program director's office, the learning contract triggers a paperwork chain related to enrollment, course creation, financial aid, and tuition charges. The contract then provides a written record of the student's participation in the honors program and documentation of the completed honors project. Finally, the learning contract also reminds all parties of the original project idea. Over the course of the semester, students and faculty can lose track of that initial idea as they pursue tangential lines of research. To earn credit, the project must stay reasonably true to the original idea as outlined in the approved learning contract.

Lest we leave readers with the impression that the development and implementation of our learning contract process was all wine and roses, we should mention that we did encounter several challenges along the way. The version of the learning contract included in the Appendix is the fifth, not the first, iteration. Over the course of four years, we have modified the contract several times in response to feedback from supervising faculty members, students, program coordinators, and administrators seeking clarity on some aspects of the form. In addition, the honors committee found that earlier versions did not provide sufficient information to review and approve the honors projects. The current version of the learning contract has been in use for the last year, and it seems to be working as intended. Based on these experiences, we highly recommend flexible, carefully mentored learning contracts built upon solid project frameworks and clear learning outcomes. The implementation of such learning contracts has allowed our honors students, faculty, and the program itself to enjoy success beyond our wildest dreams.

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## APPENDIX

### Madison College Honors Project Learning Contract

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

Student Madison College I.D. \_\_\_\_\_

Student Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Credits (2–3) (1 credit = 51 hrs) \_\_\_\_\_

Supervising Honors Faculty \_\_\_\_\_

Faculty Discipline Area \_\_\_\_\_

Supervising Dean \_\_\_\_\_

Catalog # \_\_\_\_\_

Project Start Date \_\_\_\_\_ Project Completion Date \_\_\_\_\_

Campus where project will be completed

☐ Madison-Truax      ☐ Madison-Commercial Avenue      ☐ Madison-South

☐ Madison-West      ☐ Fort Atkinson      ☐ Portage

☐ Reedsburg      ☐ Watertown      ☐ Online

Title of Project (limit 30 characters with spaces) \_\_\_\_\_

Description of Honors Project (limit 211 characters with spaces)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Note: An optional 1-page description of the project can be included with the Learning Contract.*

#### Eligibility for Honors Project:

Completed by Student and Honors Supervising Faculty Member  
(check all that apply):

- ☐ The student has a cumulative GPA of 3.5 or higher from Madison College.
- ☐ The student has completed a minimum of 12 college degree credits.
- ☐ (For incoming high school students only) The student has a cumulative High School GPA of 3.5 or higher.
- ☐ The student has received Instructor permission.

Completed by Honors Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_ Cum. GPA      \_\_\_\_\_ # Credits

**Learning Objectives**—Must be completed by the Honors Supervising Faculty Member (please be specific):

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**Criteria for Evaluating the Honors Project**—Must be completed by the Honors Supervising Faculty Member (please include a breakdown of the % of the overall grade for each project component; these should align with the Learning Objectives above; you may also attach a grading rubric):

*A to F grading scale:*

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**Required Meetings, Conferences, or Other Activities:**

*Weekly meetings:*

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**Textbooks and Other Required Materials:**

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**For Honors Projects that Require Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval:**

- ☐ I plan to conduct research involving human subjects for my Honors Project (e.g., observations, interviews, surveys) and will not begin collecting data until I obtain approval from the Madison College Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**Required materials to include with the Learning Contract:**

- ☐ I have completed a literature review as a previous Honors Project on this topic.
- ☐ I have attached the Honors Faculty Research Experience Checklist.
- ☐ I have attached a copy of the Informed Consent Form for the Honors Project.
- ☐ My Honors Project involves survey research. I have attached a copy of the interview questions to be asked.

*Note: For an example of an Informed Consent Form and further information about the policies and procedures for Honors Projects involving human subjects, please see the Institutional Review Board section on the Honors Program website.*

All required materials must first be submitted to the Honors Program Director, who will submit them to the Honors Advisory Committee for review and approval. Once approved, the Honors Program Director then will forward the materials to the IRB Committee for their review and approval.

- ☐ I plan to conduct research involving animals in my Honors Project. (Please contact the Honors Program Director for instructions and information prior to collecting data.)

**Required Certifications:**

- ☐ I understand that I am responsible for providing a final copy of my Honors Project to the Honors Program Director at the end of the semester. (Contact the Honors Program Director to work out the details for submission of non-paper Honors Projects.)
- ☐ I understand that my photo, likeness, or name may be used for appropriate marketing and recruitment purposes for the Honors Program, including inclusion in annual reports, brochures, posters, and the Honors Program website.
- ☐ I give the Honors Program and Madison College permission to use my photo, likeness, or name and will make no monetary or other claim of any kind for the appropriate use of these materials.
- ☐ I do not give the Honors Program or Madison College permission to use my photo, likeness, or name for marketing, recruitment, or other purposes.

**Required Signatures:**

You must have the proper signatures below before enrolling in the Honors Program.

Student \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Honors Supervising Faculty Member \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dean \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Honors Program Director \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Submit the completed Learning Contract to the Administrative staff in the Honors Supervising Faculty Member's Dean's office.*