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## Building Honors Contracts: Insights and Oversights -- Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

# **Building Honors Contracts: Insights and Oversights**

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This book asks an overdue question: can we build honors contracts that transcend the transactional? The word “contract” itself—as both noun and verb—delimits more possibilities than it reveals. The chapters collected here expand this restrictive term by reframing honors contracts as collaborative partnerships for experiential learning. While most, though not all, of the volume’s contributors accept standard definitions of honors contracts as “[e]nriched options within regular [non-honors] courses,” they also imagine many and varied possibilities for such enrichment (Schuman 33). The subtitle’s pairing of “Insights” and “Oversights” thus suggests not that the authors have seen it all or missed the point when it comes to honors contracts, but that contracts, like courses, benefit from the creative pedagogical approaches and thoughtful administrative practices that define honors education. Caitlin McCuskey’s *Home*, the cover art for this monograph, captures a key idea of the book as a whole: the work of building honors curricula is both imaginative and structural. The beauty of honors education, like that of the cover art, lies in both the scaffolding and color of its conceptual architecture. By mapping honors contracts onto that imaginative blueprint, this book empowers honors educators to build communities and curricula that welcome their various administrators, faculty members, and students home.

Acting together as a longer, more detailed framing of the volume than this brief introduction, Richard Badenhausen’s “Curriculum Gone Bad: The Case against Honors Contracts” and Shirley Shultz

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Myers and Geoffrey Whitebread’s “The Timeliness of Honors Contracts” establish the problem, historicize the practice, and reframe the question of honors contracts. In his opening gambit, Badenhauen plays devil’s advocate, challenging contributors to make the case for contracts by addressing five specific arguments against them. Myers and Whitebread then launch the defense in Chapter Two, rebutting the prosecution’s opening remarks by presenting evidence of contemporary contract success alongside a heavily researched historical overview grounding this pedagogical practice in the British tutorial model. Because the framing work of the first two chapters is so comprehensive, this introduction primarily highlights the contributors’ various approaches to our volume’s central argument: as part of the honors curriculum, contracts demand the same attention as courses, a point that all of the volume’s contributors make in various ways.

The pedagogical conversation surrounding contracts has to date been more practical than inspirational, perhaps because many institutions have framed honors contracts as necessary stopgaps—rather than pedagogical catalysts—within the honors curriculum. Significantly, ten of the volume’s thirteen chapters (including this introduction) cite Kambra Bolch’s very pragmatic 2005 case study, published in *Honors in Practice*, which “outlines the problems with contracting that developed over several years at Texas Tech University, comments on the process by which solutions were identified, and presents the solutions that were created” (49). Patrick Bahls’s more recent contribution to *Honors in Practice*, “Contracts for Honors Credit: Balancing Access, Equity, and Opportunities for Authentic Learning” surveys past scholarship (172–74), calls for new work (174), and argues that contracts can shape the educational experience of both honors and non-honors students. Building on this and other work concerning the role of advanced placement (Guzy) and experiential learning (DiLauro, Meyers, and Guertin) in honors education, this volume suggests that contracts expand more than they limit the honors curriculum. The contributors seek to inspire curricular innovation by explaining how contracts can foster academic curiosity and ignite research passion. They cite

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contract examples from across disciplines, suggesting that mentored boundary-crossing, beyond the walls of the classroom, lets students take controlled risks with practical, lifelong rewards. The best contracts, they contend, challenge students to think creatively, ethically, and rigorously: whether their work is in civil engineering or art history, English or nursing, chemistry or communication studies, students can discover through honors contracts the limits, possibilities, and value of their own academic knowledge.

To make this point, the book's structure moves from the philosophical to the practical. Once readers have heard opening statements from both prosecution (Badenhausen) and defense (Myers and Whitebread) in Chapters One and Two, the volume's third and fourth chapters demonstrate how honors contracts can work as inclusive pedagogical tools. In Chapter Three, "Honors Contracts: Empowering Students and Fostering Autonomy in Honors Education," Anne Dotter introduces the compelling social justice argument that, particularly at a large research university, contracts can often successfully guide first-generation and under-represented groups of students through an unfamiliar range of academic expectations and requirements. Contracts do this work, she suggests, by building mentoring relationships, modeling independent and group work, accounting for financial constraints, teaching self-advocacy, and engaging faculty in recruiting and mentoring a broad range of students. Jon Hageman applies some of these ideas to non-traditional students at a much smaller commuter school in Chapter Four, "An Undeserved Reputation: How Contract Courses Can Work for a Small Honors Program," which illustrates how proactive, individualized contract advising "can provide access to honors for a highly diverse student body" (95).

The book's next three chapters explore specific benefits of contracts for both faculty and students. In Chapter Five, "One Hand Washes the Other: Designing Mutually Beneficial Honors Contracts," Antonina Bambina contends that positive faculty experiences with contracts lead directly to student success, and she therefore demonstrates through a series of examples the importance of intentional contract design focused on mutual benefit. Cindy S.

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Ticknor and Shamim Khan examine in more detail how contracts support student success in Chapter Six, “Honors Contracts: A Scaffolding to Independent Inquiry,” which explores how contracts can systematically prepare students for success in advanced honors capstone work. James G. Snyder and Melinda Weisberg’s Chapter Seven, “Enhancing the Structure and Impact of Honors by Contract Projects with Templates and Research Hubs,” takes an innovative approach to systemizing contracts: they advocate for the strategic development of contract templates and research hubs as part of the scaffolding that Ticknor and Khan describe in Chapter Six.

Acknowledging all of these student and faculty benefits, the volume’s next four chapters create a toolkit for honors programs and colleges by describing some practical approaches to integrating honors contracts into a fully developed honors curriculum. In Chapter Eight, “Ensuring a Quality Honors Experience through Learning Contracts: Success beyond Our Wildest Dreams,” Julia A. Haseleu and Laurie A. Taylor share concrete ways of connecting project-based with classroom-based learning in honors curricula at two-year colleges. Starting from the premise that clear honors learning outcomes should define and shape the entire honors curriculum, Gary Wyatt argues in Chapter Nine, “A High-Impact Strategy for Honors Contract Courses,” for aligning requirements of honors contract proposals and assessment with those of more traditional courses. Erin E. Edgington turns in Chapter Ten, “Facilitating Feedback: The Benefits of Automation in Monitoring Completion of Honors Contracts,” to the practical task of introducing and automating standardized assessment rubrics for contracts at both the proposal and completion stages, changes that have both improved assessment and decreased paperwork for students and faculty at her mid-sized institution. Ken D. Thomas and Suzanne P. Hunter describe another practical approach to digital contract management in Chapter Eleven, “Moving Honors Contracts into the Digital Age: Processes, Impacts, and Opinions,” suggesting the importance and value of automating contracts, even at a very large research institution.

The volume concludes with my own contribution in Chapter Twelve, “Honors in Practice: Beyond the Classroom,” which circles

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back to the philosophical issues that frame the volume as a whole. The chapter contests Badenhausen's charge that contracts are potentially counter-curricular with a reframing question: what if we could productively expand the curriculum by redefining both classroom and community in honors education? As the book's conclusion, the chapter asks not only why but also how to engage honors students in two pedagogical best practices particularly well suited to contracts: experiential learning and guided reflection, ideas that Bahls also explores briefly in his recent *Honors in Practice* piece. Challenging the conventional definition of contracts as course-based learning, this concluding chapter intends, as others in the volume do, to champion the flexibility of honors contracts and explore the central role these mentoring agreements can play in extending the honors community. The goal of this chapter, like that of the book as a whole, is to engage imaginations and thus start conversations about the possibilities for building honors contracts.

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