

## CHAPTER TEN

# Online Education, Honors, and the Engaged University: Modeling Experiential Learning for Fully Online Students at Fort Hays State University

KEVIN S. AMIDON AND GREGORY ATKINS  
FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, Fort Hays State University (FHSU) has undertaken two major initiatives to broaden its opportunities to recruit, retain, and graduate students successfully because the demographics of its home region have presented challenges. First, beginning in the late 1990s, it established a nationally competitive set of fully online degree offerings through what is now known as FHSU Online. FHSU Online currently enrolls the majority of FHSU's U.S.-based students. Then, in the mid-2010s, FHSU invested in developing

a now-thriving honors college. Until recently, the honors college has focused exclusively on enriching the on-campus experience for students who make a commitment to academic and community engagement. During the last few years, the leaders of both FHSU Online and the FHSU Honors College have explored many ways to foster strong student engagement and have begun comparing the lessons they have learned and exploring the synergies that they believe can be achieved from working together. They plan to extend to FHSU Online students the opportunities for greater engagement through service and experiential learning that provide the core of the FHSU Honors College mission. This development will better attend to the needs of diverse cohorts of students and benefit both programs individually as well as the university as a whole. While this development of an FHSU Honors Online initiative is only in its pilot phase, students in the initial pilot cohort have already been able to extend and deepen their engagement with the university's academic and co-curricular programs, and with their communities, through this initiative.

This essay outlines the principles upon which the FHSU Honors Online initiative will be based and proposes ways of achieving successful honors outcomes in student-centered ways that are appropriate and meaningful to both on-campus and online cohorts. We propose a structure guided by a Community of Inquiry (COI) framework that respects and reflects the social, cognitive, and academic needs of diverse students as individuals and groups. This results in a concentric curricular model in which the student's academic major field provides a broad, encompassing space for inner fields of co-curricular experiential learning and service. Honors staff work with students to provide guidance and accountability that facilitate success. Concrete examples from our pilot phase experience of the structure and application of these principles are provided in subsequent sections of this article.

## **THE FHSU HONORS ONLINE VISION: ENGAGEMENT, SERVICE, AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

The current honors college leadership interprets its institutional charge in a spirit of service and engagement through experiential learning. An honors degree from FHSU means that students have developed a meaningful portfolio of experiences that go beyond classroom

outcomes and expectations. Honors college students serve academic knowledge by developing research, scholarly, and creative skills across the disciplines; engage with the campus community as a whole; develop networks with broader local and regional communities; and work toward a broad, global perspective on lifelong learning and career development. Individual students develop their own path to service and engagement through experiential learning of many kinds, and the honors college provides support, accountability, and recognition.

The honors college and FHSU Online recognize the potential synergy in their missions, especially with respect to student engagement through service. The authors began the process of developing these synergies and implementing programs by exploring how the small number of other four-year universities, especially regional comprehensive universities like FHSU with both substantial online operations and successful honors colleges, have initiated online honors education. Two of the most prominent of these universities include Old Dominion University and Florida International University although neither appears to have elaborated ideas and procedures well enough to provide a clear model for best practices. Universities with vastly larger resources both on-campus and online, like Arizona State University, cannot be considered appropriate larger-scale models for FHSU, but they may in the future offer specific elements of online honors education that can be successfully applied.

The authors concur with the general conclusion of Nightingale's 2014 argument that no contradiction exists between honors education and online delivery—whether for students who are enrolled fully online or those who take a mix of in-person, hybrid, and online courses. They therefore seek to expand opportunities in honors education to FHSU's many fully online students in a way that both recognizes the uniqueness of fully online education and preserves and expands the service-oriented and experiential culture of honors. They further seek to do so in concert with FHSU's Office of the Director of Civic Learning and Engagement. This office is charged with developing community engagement as widely as possible and also with achieving and maintaining FHSU among the universities holding Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement (*The 2024 Elective Classification for Community Engagement*).

## **HISTORY, CULTURE, AND DEMOGRAPHICS OF ONLINE AND HONORS EDUCATION AT FHSU**

Fort Hays State University, from the day of its founding as the Western Branch of the Kansas Normal School teachers college in 1902, has sought to find the most effective ways to reach rural, remote, and economically disadvantaged populations. This mission has always required a close focus on the needs of students, stakeholders, and the broader community. The regional profile of FHSU's part of the state is more profoundly rural than even that of Kansas as a whole. The institution is the only one of Kansas's seven four-year public universities west of Wichita, which is over 60% of the state's geographic area. FHSU therefore directly serves a region of about 200,000 square miles with approximately 500,000 people, averaging fewer than 3 people per square mile (*Kansas Counties by Population*). FHSU's home city, Hays, is the twentieth-largest city in Kansas, with an estimated 2021 population of 20,608. Only the major meatpacking cities of Dodge City and Garden City, have (slightly) larger populations within FHSU's traditional area of service. Most counties, cities, and towns in the region are also losing population at a steady rate (*Top 500 Cities in Kansas by Population*). The most significant ongoing demographic shift in the region is the rapid relative growth of the Hispanic population, which is largely in the meatpacking cities but also in smaller towns and rural counties (Hunt and Panas iii-iv). FHSU is embracing these transitions to build an integrated model of on-campus and online education that can equitably serve the needs of its transforming region with effective, high-value programs and also offer unique quality and value to national audiences.

Distance education began at FHSU in 1911 with correspondence courses offered primarily to teachers in one-room schoolhouses across Western Kansas. Many of these courses were free continuing education programs that served teachers as part of their state license renewal process. The Correspondence Department formed an important part of the institution for many decades, developing into the Department of Continuing Education and Instructional Technology. In the mid-1990s, FHSU administrators identified two challenges: a shrinking rural population that threatened the university's long-term viability because of diminishing demand for on-campus education and the need

for resources to improve the delivery of FHSU's pre-digital distance-learning programs, for which there was nonetheless still substantial demand. In 1997, FHSU transformed its Department of Continuing Education and Instructional Technology into the FHSU Virtual College, thus becoming a pioneer in offering fully fledged web-based degree programs to off-campus and non-resident students.

After more than twenty years of steady growth resulting in a total online enrollment of approximately 6,500 students, the FHSU Virtual College was renamed FHSU Online in 2020. A small number of central FHSU Online staff work together with departmental faculty and the staff of FHSU's Teaching Innovation and Learning Technologies (TILT) to develop infrastructure and curriculum that support effective, high-quality, high-value online learning. TILT reports to the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost, and the FHSU Online staff report to the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs. This structure has paired the steady growth of online students with a nationally recognized, high-quality online learning experience. FHSU Online is one of only six national programs to achieve membership in the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA). USDLA membership demonstrates that FHSU Online's programs meet stringent requirements for best practices in academic rigor, program delivery, and student engagement. Alongside the growth of FHSU Online, in the early 2000s FHSU also established two partner programs at universities in China where Chinese on-campus students can achieve an FHSU degree through study with FHSU-employed English-speaking faculty in business-oriented programs.

Like many honors initiatives, the FHSU Honors College began as an on-campus program meant to foster student recruitment, retention, success, and engagement; it also was designed so that well-prepared students from FHSU's traditional rural region could contribute in a rich way to campus life. In the honors college, these students could find opportunities and support for their academic, professional, and personal ambitions and goals commensurate to those available from larger universities, but they could do so at the institution they and their families knew and valued as a linchpin of their community and region. After a number of halting attempts to develop an honors program in the 1970s and 1990s, the honors college was established in 2014 with a charge to provide enriched opportunities and support for

on-campus students in all academic programs across the university. The program is structured congruently with National Collegiate Honors Council principles and best practices as applicable to a rural-serving state comprehensive university that strives to provide a high-quality experience to students and families. Since 2018 it has directly served between 90 and 100 students (approximately 2% of the on-campus population) with enriched curriculum; a housing community; scholarship support; academic and career development; and support for experiential goals in research, study abroad, nationally competitive scholarships, and other co-curricular initiatives leading to degrees with honors. Recent focus on developing deeper regional recruiting networks is also beginning to bear fruit, and the 2024 honors recruiting class is the largest ever by a substantial margin and the first to include several fully online students. The honors college director and administrative specialist, both full-time, work with a part-time student staff of three or four, and a group of volunteer student peer mentors to provide this support. The honors college reports to the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost.

### **DELIVERING ON-CAMPUS HONORS EDUCATION FOCUSED ON SERVICE AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

In order to focus the on-campus honors college student experience on service and engagement, the on-campus honors curriculum is designed with a maximum of flexibility. Students entering from high school take two honors-designated courses in the first year: a 1-credit expanded orientation seminar in the fall semester and an honors section of FHSU's General Education requirement course on Critical Thinking (offered in the Philosophy Department) in the spring semester. Students who transfer into FHSU, or who join the honors college after some semesters of enrollment, generally are expected to satisfy the Critical Thinking course requirement. The only other course required for completion of an honors degree is the honors capstone course, taken during one of the final two semesters before graduation.

The honors capstone course is developed as independent study for students to round off their education in a way that reflects on its relation to their career goals and preparedness and therefore to supplement

and strengthen, rather than redundantly recapitulate, work done in the increasing range of departmental capstone courses that seek to assess the skills-based outcomes of major degree programs. The capstone project is always both independently and experientially developed with input from the honors college director and other faculty. For some students it takes the form of a more traditional capstone paper in the major field. For other students the honors capstone can be a reflective writing project, creative project, or service project.

The remainder of the on-campus honors curriculum is made up of honors experiences built by individual students to engage their own interests, talents, academic goals, and professional plans. These honors experiences should average out to one per semester during the student's enrollment in the honors college, but extensive experiential work across semesters and summers, including, for example, participation in large and ongoing research collaboration, can count across multiple semesters as long as accountability is maintained through an honors contract for each semester or summer period. Honors experiences can be satisfied through any of the three following categories of engagement:

1. Honors-designated courses, most of which satisfy requirements in the General Education program. Students, depending on their previously earned college credit, are encouraged to take at least two such courses. Some take as many as seven.
2. Honors Experiences built around contracts that assure that faculty, students, and honors college staff understand each other's expectations. FHSU prefers—in ways discussed by Badenhausen—to understand contracts as a means to “foster a culture of thinking, growing, and inquiring” by generating greater experiential depth through collaboration, not simply as a form of curricular monitoring of individual students' outcomes (10-11). These can include:
  - a. Course conversions of non-honors courses to honors status;
  - b. Individualized research or creative activity in collaboration with faculty;

- c. Service projects with campus or community mentors.
- 3. Honors Experiences that do not require contracts because accountability is relatively simple for honors college staff to track. These “automatic” honors experiences include:
  - a. Internships;
  - b. Study abroad (not otherwise required in a major);
  - c. Conference or creative exhibit participation beyond the campus;
  - d. Nationally competitive scholarship applications;
  - e. Leadership roles in organizations beyond the campus level;
  - f. Official honors college employment in recruiting and student support;
  - g. Other experiential learning approved by the honors college staff.

Examples of the kinds of individualized experiential work done by students abound across many disciplines. In the natural sciences, a large portion of the research pursued by FHSU faculty includes undergraduate research collaborators, and many honors college students become actively involved in this research as early as the first semester of their first year. The honors college is highly successful in placing students into highly ranked MD, DO, PharmD, MSW, physical therapy, and occupational therapy programs—including since 2019 a 100% placement rate for students in their first year of application. Students have achieved full fellowships to nationally ranked PhD programs in fields including mathematics, physics, chemistry, medicinal chemistry, biochemistry, geosciences, paleontology, and organismal biology. The placement rate has been almost perfect. In 2021, Brynn Wooten, a student in biology and paleontology, also earned the first Goldwater Scholarship ever granted to a student in the history of FHSU. The strength of students’ experiential work in research methods and practices is the foundation of this success.

Students in business, applied technology, and agricultural fields largely seek their experiential enrichment through internships. In



FHSU's rural region, students are highly sought after and heavily recruited by local firms and government agencies in areas including banking, farm credit, deposit insurance, accounting, oil and gas, agricultural practice and technology, and manufacturing. These firms seek—and find—students passionate about helping their hometowns and regions develop and thrive. Northwest Kansas is also fortunate to have a large and generous foundation, the Dane G. Hansen Foundation, which focuses its efforts in the region on economic development, health, quality of life, and especially the arts. It provides generous scholarships to many honors college students and also to non-honors FHSU on-campus students, and it sponsors dozens of internships in local firms and industries throughout the year, many of them reserved for FHSU students but broadly open to many different majors.

FHSU also has nationally respected programs in health professions including nursing, social work, communication sciences and disorders, allied health, and psychology. While some of these social services fields allow students to experience formal internships, in cases where licensing requirements mean that direct practice as an intern is impossible, the honors college works with students individually to structure meaningful and accountable job shadowing experience that strengthens opportunities and networks for post-graduation employment.

FHSU's Department of Art and Design is another nationally recognized program that holds its students to extraordinarily high standards. The encouragement that the department gives to students to participate in co-curricular activities including juried exhibitions; community arts events; partnerships with local, regional, and national businesses; and the department's own annual honors show make it simple for the honors college to structure systematic ways for students to demonstrate a very high level of engagement and leadership.

Finally, in the fields of education and the humanities and social sciences, students participate in a wide range of research, community outreach, study abroad, internship, and academic conference activities that develop experiential depth. The FHSU Honors College also encourages students from all fields to step into leadership roles in student government, campus events, Greek life, honors college and university-wide recruiting, university development, and other areas of engagement to structure accountable, meaningful experiences. Through our annual assessment surveys, the FHSU Honors College

can demonstrate that students increasingly value these experiences because they understand their importance for career preparedness and strong self-advocacy.

## **EXTENDING HONORS EDUCATION TO FHSU ONLINE STUDENTS: PRINCIPLES, BEST PRACTICES, AND THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY FRAMEWORK**

Online students at FHSU are a diverse group. In fall 2020, there were online students in 32 countries outside the U.S.; they ranged in age from 15 to 81 and majored in everything from a BBA in Accounting to a Doctorate of Nursing Practice (DNP). Of course, a few trends define this diversity. Among the 32 countries represented outside of the U.S., most have only one to three FHSU Online students. Thanks to connections in our Computer Science Department, Cambodia contains the most FHSU Online students outside the U.S. with 12 attending in fall 2020. Similarly, all but a smattering of FHSU Online students are between 20 and 50 years old, with those in their mid-20s to mid-30s making up a solid majority. Decisive trends guide the choice of majors among online students as well. Although these students have several hundred program concentrations from which to choose, a full 27% select those in the category of Liberal Arts and Sciences/Liberal Studies, which offers many concentrations that do not require the full investment of credit required in a major. Elementary education and nursing each represent 12% of all majors, and psychology represents 11%. Online students majoring in other areas only represent single-digit percentages of all online students. Through extensive personal interaction with online students, the experience of the authors suggests that a sizable majority of all online students at FHSU are working professionals who are also continuing their education.

The rise of online education over the past decades has led to repeated calls for greater student engagement. To cite a notable example, scholars of teaching and learning have called for more than twenty years for the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework to more thoroughly apply to online course development (Castellanos-Reyes). The COI framework seeks to analyze educational processes into three central forms of presence: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. These distinctions are based on principles

going back to the work of Charles Sanders Pierce and John Dewey (Pardales and Girod; Shields). Johnson argues that the COI framework is particularly applicable to honors education and, furthermore, that it can guide successful exploration of online models of honors educational delivery (90). The authors of this article concur. We have sought to develop the proposed structure of FHSU Honors Online student experience to highlight overlapping aspects of the three layers of presence identified through the COI framework. Johnson's article contains a number of useful concrete suggestions that have motivated our ideas.

The FHSU Honors Online initiative further seeks to address other gaps in student engagement identified among FHSU's online and also on-campus students through the National Survey of Student Engagement and other institution-specific and honors college-based surveys and program assessments. The authors have discussed these ideas further with FHSU leaders including Dr. Andrew Feldstein, who guides the work of FHSU TILT. FHSU Honors Online offers another critical arena outside the classroom for active-space learning with peers, faculty, and staff (Milman). It seeks to develop opportunities for students "to project their personal characteristics into the community [of inquiry], thereby presenting themselves to other participants as 'real people'" (Garrison et al. 89). This makes the principles of the FHSU Honors Online initiative congruent with those noted by Slavin as a fundamental way we can "define honors culture": "taking intellectual risks" beyond the established material of their academic program, which the authors broaden to include experiential learning that goes beyond a departmental curriculum (15). Scott and Frana also provide support for the authors' reflections on service learning, extramural evaluation, and project-orientation (30). In short, experientially based online honors education meets the essential requirements stated by Anderson and Dron:

The need for . . . representation, for multiple perspectives, and for awareness that knowledge is socially validated demanded the capacity for distance education to be a social activity as well as the development of cohort, as opposed to individual study, organizational models of instruction. (85)

While progress is notable in the past decade, much work remains to be done in transitioning online education, including at FHSU, from top-down, teacher-and-textbook-fronted models to deeper models of learning and inquiry that are socially engaging, interactive, and experiential.

A range of FHSU departments and institutions are currently seeking to strengthen this social aspect of online education, and several now offer student-led “Circles of Support” to online students. Social Work and Psychology are leaders in this initiative. They are building work in these Circles into both academic and co-curricular forms of learning. The FHSU Virtual Student Senate (not yet renamed to reflect the new name of FHSU Online) is also growing substantially in vigor and institutional effectiveness. It has recently pursued several initiatives to help FHSU demonstrate that fully online students are crucial university stakeholders who deserve to have their sometimes unique—but equally important—academic needs reflected in university-wide policy.

Since the FHSU Honors Online initiative is in its pilot phase, we have only just begun to develop examples of successful experiential work by students. What we hope to instigate is online students linking their online education closely to interests they have in community engagement. In this way, we hope to develop a sense among online students that their education can also be broadly enriched with co-curricular elements similar to those found in the on-campus environment but commensurate with their own needs and life circumstances.

One of the earliest members of our honors online cohort, Chelsea Kiefer, is a non-traditional online student of history. From her home in North Carolina, however, she has become a pillar of the History Department’s research and outreach efforts. She participates regularly in the department’s podcast series. She has earned a prestigious internship with a regional archive in North Carolina. She has even traveled to Kansas at the department’s invitation to attend an academic conference in Wichita, where she presented her insights about her archival work. She has accomplished all of these things without ever setting foot on the FHSU campus itself. Another student in the initial cohort is developing research collaborations in the Psychology Department in pursuit of her goals for graduate study and eventual practice with veterans with post-traumatic conditions. Students are also pursuing

contracts or course conversion ideas, which can serve as the gateway to independent research or capstone projects. As the FHSU Honors Online initiative grows and demonstrates not only its viability but its place at the center of the honors college's mission, we plan to provide dedicated guidance to these students with an honors online advisor.

### **CONGRUENCE OF FULLY ONLINE AND IN-PERSON EDUCATION: APPROPRIATE LEVEL AND INSIGHTS GAINED FROM THE COVID-19 EXPERIENCE**

Almost all students in higher education have now experienced online education in various forms—some well-developed, some ad hoc—as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thrust online unexpectedly, many on-campus students found student engagement lacking in their new online classrooms. As 2020–2021 FHSU student body president Brad Demers stated:

This move to online learning is not ideal. To many of us, attending classes online is difficult and less rewarding. Online students, however, deal with this every day. We as on-campus students now have a great opportunity to address the problems and shortfalls of online learning and advocate for ways to make it as enriching and engaging as classes on campus.

Just as the pandemic revealed vast shortcomings in public health services, the move to online education for students acculturated to the on-campus experience revealed similar shortcomings in experiences and expectations related to student engagement.

The authors identify these shortcomings perceived by on-campus students due to the enforced online and hybrid environment during the COVID-19 pandemic as having derived from discordant expectations related to the three presences of the COI framework. Research about such expectations and whether the three presences demonstrably suffered from the COVID-contingent transition to online learning varies widely. (Compare Ebersole and Tan for varying perspectives.) The authors' experience was that on-campus students forced into an online environment often felt, at least at the level of short-term qualitative perception, that their education had lost some quality, focus, and

communicative interactivity in all three COI aspects: social, cognitive, and teaching. The authors participated in an online experiential learning series aimed at addressing this perceived paucity of interactivity by developing student engagement in COVID-19 community outreach. The initiative was a shared project among the honors college, the Center for Entrepreneurship at the FHSU Robbins College of Business and Entrepreneurship, FHSU Online, and other campus stakeholders. Representatives from these areas included both the on-campus cohort working online and the FHSU Online cohort working in their normal modality during the pandemic. In sessions spread out over a few months, students successfully pursued various ideas generated by students and faculty about how best to reach others with proven strategies to develop community awareness and entrepreneurial ways of addressing the COVID-19 pandemic (Talkington).

Several insights from the COVID-19 experience can help address the disconnect between the experiences of fully online and on-campus students. Circumstances made clear the differentiation of what must vary in online and on-campus curricular and experiential approaches and what can be made successfully parallel when developing the FHSU Honors Online initiative. First, the three COI presences are a useful guide to the appropriate level of congruence between fully online and on-campus educational experience. Each modality has some similar and some divergent aspects in how the presences can be successfully grounded and maintained. Second, the synchronous hybrid-flex model in which students attended in person once per week and synchronously online on other days, adopted in many courses during academic year 2020–2021 to assure classroom distancing, can be adapted into a working model for incorporating fully online students into on-campus honors courses. This strategy assumes, of course, that they are able to participate in synchronous education given the other professional and personal commitments that often motivate them to choose fully online education over on-campus offerings. The FHSU Honors Online initiative seeks to be accessible to students with the full range of possible academic and personal motivations.

## **CONCENTRIC CURRICULAR MODEL FOR EXPANDING HONORS EDUCATION TO FULLY ONLINE DEGREE-SEEKING STUDENTS**

FHSU manages its resources carefully, believing that broad access is best assured to both on-campus and online students by maintaining base tuition and fees as low as possible. The institution, therefore, does not have unencumbered resources available to build an FHSU Honors Online experience with dedicated staff. Current staff from both FHSU Online and the honors college will develop a recruiting and outreach strategy that builds on current efforts and that appeals to FHSU Online students who seek to enrich their learning process experientially. No specific growth target will be set, but once honors online student numbers reach approximately 20, the honors college hopes to secure dedicated resources to support individualized advising for honors online students.

Recruiting will begin at the level of the typical digital outreach to prospective students by FHSU Online and the honors college. Prospective FHSU Online students who express interest in honors education will be referred to honors college staff for further details about the experiential qualities of the FHSU Honors Online program. Similar to on-campus honors students, FHSU Honors Online students will be expected to seek a bachelor's degree in any field and to have a minimum of approximately 60 credits remaining in their academic major.

FHSU Honors Online students, however, may be part-time students; that option is not the case for on-campus honors college students. As resources become available and student numbers increase, a 1-credit "Welcome to Honors Online" course may be developed to help students establish expectations and accountability. This course would help students establish a baseline understanding of the experiential principles underlying FHSU honors education. Moreover, this experience will lower barriers and reduce anxieties when online students approach faculty, staff, and non-academic partners, and it will also help students understand the wide range of possible experiential learning opportunities. Students will individually approach their faculty to discuss ways in which they can demonstrate greater engagement and deepen their readiness to pursue a career. A special focus will also be placed on techniques for fostering successful collaboration at a distance.

When students join FHSU Honors Online, they will establish an “Honors Online Plan,” a document that will be updated each semester. This plan will parallel in many ways the experiential approach taken with on-campus students, allowing students to demonstrate and show accountability for experiences across time that go beyond the expectations of the online classroom. From interest already expressed in honors education by prospective FHSU Online students, the authors expect that online students, who are often older, will come to the program with established track records of service and community involvement. These track records can be built into substantial elements of the student’s Honors Online Plan leading up to a capstone experience parallel to the on-campus capstone.

The curricular model built around COI principles contains three concentric layers:

- A. The outer and most encompassing field, representing the teaching and cognitive COI presences, is represented by the student’s academic major program. Honors college staff will work with major advisors to help FHSU Honors Online students build experiential elements successfully into their online majors.
- B. The middle field, representing the cognitive COI presence, is made up of the experiential forms of academic and career-preparedness enrichment that are parallel to the honors experiences expected of on-campus honors college students. The Honors Online Plan provides for a longer-term focus to help students perceive value and maintain accountability, and in some cases an FHSU Honors Online contract will be built to set and manage stakeholder expectations. Common forms of experiential and co-curricular enrichment are expected to include:
  - 1. Internships and formal professional development;
  - 2. FHSU Online course conversions (through which students develop a contract with faculty leading their non-honors-designated courses to develop individualized honors content);



### 3. Undergraduate research

- a. Faculty-student partnerships guided by honors contracts. The FHSU Psychology Department has pioneered undergraduate research with FHSU Online students and provides a successful model for this work.
  - b. Self-directed and community-based projects overseen by honors college staff.
- C. The inner field, representing the social and cognitive COI presences, is made up of forms of service learning and engagement that take place collaboratively. Each FHSU Honors Online student will be expected to demonstrate how their educational process serves the larger community. This expectation can take place in many ways, some more traditionally co-curricular, some through self-directed community engagement.
- D. Each FHSU Honors Online student's capstone project will develop out of these three fields/presences to link educational outcomes with career goals.

The administration of FHSU Honors Online will be coordinated by the FHSU Honors College with assistance from the FHSU Online staff and input from departmental advisors. In mid-2021, the initial web presence described the program on both the honors college and FHSU Online sites. As expected, we received a small number of applications, and these students served as pilot members of FHSU Honors Online in 2021-2022. The success of these students will provide the basis for expanding the program's marketing outreach.

Student services will provide an on-campus student mentor. As the program develops, the student mentor and honors college staff will meet occasionally by videoconference during the academic year with the pilot cohort of FHSU Honors Online students. Initially, the Honors College Academic Committee will assist in reviewing and developing new ideas for contract-based experiential learning among

FHSU Honors Online students. If a separate committee dedicated to the FHSU Honors Online cohort becomes desirable, one will be impaneled.

### **CONCLUSION: FHSU HONORS ONLINE AS AN INSTITUTIONAL NETWORKING, ENGAGEMENT, AND INNOVATION AGENT**

The development of FHSU Honors Online furthers the institution's mission by bringing together its well-developed expertise and experience to serve an important and growing cohort of students in a new and innovative way. These plans build on existing strengths to offer new paths to engaged, service-oriented experiential learning for online students who can easily feel distant from such institutional goals. Honors education is a proven means to successful recruiting, retention, and engagement, and it can enrich FHSU Online's initiatives in all of these areas. And it can be done with a minimum of new resources.

FHSU's planning process and pilot project discussed in this essay have broader implications that highlight the need for careful, institutionally grounded needs assessment to develop online honors opportunities in ways congruent with broader student outcomes and strategic goals. Fully online students must be met where they are, and their needs and goals cannot be mapped straightforwardly onto the experiences and curricular structures developed for and oriented toward on-campus students. Most importantly, institutions must remember that experiential learning and its associated high-impact outcomes require, for fully online students, an even greater investment in the individual needs and goals of the student. One-size-fits-all programs will not be able to generate in fully online student populations the kinds of vigorous academic, campus, and community engagement that is the hallmark of successful on-campus honors opportunities. Well-crafted fully online programs will open honors education to new and important student populations. Their time has come.

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## *Teaching, Learning, and Building Community Virtually in Honors Education*

Victoria M. Bryan AND  
Cat Stanfield, EDITORS

Series Editor | Jeffrey A. Portnoy  
Perimeter College, Georgia State University  
National Collegiate Honors Council  
Monograph Series

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Manufactured in the United States

**National Collegiate Honors Council**

440 N. 17th Street  
250 Knoll  
Lincoln, NE 68588  
[nchchonors.org](http://nchchonors.org)

Production Editor | Design Layout  
Wes Hollywood & Beth Roman  
blackout design

International Standard Book Number  
978-1-945001-24-6

