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Using Hybrid Courses to Enhance Honors Offerings in the Disciplines

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How honors faculty and administrators might best respond to the challenge of AP/IP/dual enrollment credit mandates across the country will depend largely on the nature of their institutions and the size, structure, and mission of their individual programs. While the debate will continue about long-term consequences for the quality of higher education, the realities of the mandates have begun to force new and creative thinking about curriculum design in honors programs that could lead to positive developments for both students and faculty. In response to the demand to develop honors course offerings beyond the general education curriculum, the honors program at Oklahoma City University has experimented with creating hybrid courses that have expanded the honors curriculum in some beneficial new ways, enabling more students to complete honors requirements while increasing the scope of our program's positive impact on our institution as a whole.

Like many other programs across the nation that came into being in the 80s and 90s, the OCU Honors Program developed a liberal arts honors

curriculum consisting primarily of honors sections of core courses that fulfilled general education requirements. Primarily, this philosophical choice followed the tradition of James Herbert's "thinking and rethinking," which Annmarie Guzy references in her lead article: the conviction that an honors education aims to develop astute critical thinkers in a traditional liberal arts curriculum that provides a strong foundation and springboard for advanced study in a variety of majors and fields. The realities of our program in a small university also made this approach a practical necessity as we did not have the student numbers to fill honors sections of upper-level courses in most majors. Honors work in the major would have to be pursued via contract, an agreement with a professor to complete more advanced work through individual assignments while otherwise participating like any other student in the non-honors course.

For the program's first decade or two, this curricular approach worked well in both providing a feasible way for students to complete the required twenty-four honors credits and creating a cohesive honors experience in the arts and sciences. Recently, however, with greater and greater numbers of honors students entering our program with more and more core credits completed, our established curriculum was beginning to align less and less with these students' remaining degree requirements. While most entering honors freshmen could still carve out an honors degree plan that combined the few honors core courses they still needed with a series of honors contracts in the major, we had a growing sense that our general education honors model might not remain sufficient for new generations of honors students and that we needed to give attention to developing more honors opportunities in upper-level courses.

Also, we needed to be willing to see a shift toward a concentration of honors work in the major as something more than a diminution of our honors core. Students have for some time expressed a desire for more honors course opportunities in the major, but the concern among honors faculty and honors committee members has always been that an honors track consisting of half or more of the total honors credits as independent contract work would undermine the integrative and communal nature of the honors experience. What we needed were more opportunities for students to earn honors credit within discipline-specific courses without sacrificing the interactive and collaborative environment of the honors classroom.

The response, initiated by my predecessors as honors director, has been to develop hybrid courses in a few majors that have a critical mass of honors

students—not enough to form a separate honors section but enough to form a small group who can work together completing contract-level work in collaborative engagement with each other. We define a hybrid course as an honors section of four to ten students that is cross-listed with a regular section of the same course for which the maximum enrollment is adjusted to account for the honors subset. Students in the honors section complete all requirements of the regular section plus the requirements of the Honors Supplement Syllabus. One faculty member teaches the general course and also facilitates supplemental assignments and projects for the honors subset of the class.

Currently, we offer four courses in this hybrid format: Dance History I and II (2000-level), General Microbiology (3000-level), and Musical Form and Analysis (4000-level). We plan to add Theatre History II (3000-level) in the spring of 2017. As this list suggests, the types of major courses that a program decides to develop depends largely on the character of the institution and the majors most common among the honors student body. OCU draws a large number of its honors students from the schools of music, dance, and theatre while maintaining a very slight majority of honors students in the College of Arts and Sciences.

In addition to offering a practical solution for honors students who come to college with much of the general education curriculum completed, hybrid courses enhance the overall honors experience by encouraging advanced work in the discipline that goes beyond the individual research project. In Honors General Microbiology, for instance, students work together in groups of three to four to establish semester-long projects that require them to work together an extra hour every week fine-tuning their research questions and testing principles learned in the regular section of the course. They then complete a lab experiment and subsequent poster presentation to be presented at our program-sponsored undergraduate research day. In recent years, students completing the course have also presented at regional scientific conferences, the NCHC annual conference, or our regional honors conference. Similarly, in Musical Form and Analysis, the honors subset meets weekly from mid-term on to discuss musical texts that present problems for the conventional sonata form, a form that the class as a whole surveys during the previous unit. Each honors student then completes a final project that explores, through specific texts, the complicated evolution of the sonata form through the twentieth century.

The advantages of introducing hybrid courses extend beyond the program and its members to the larger student body. In a recent *JNCHC* Forum

on “The Institutional Impact of Honors,” James Clauss pointed to important ways that honors programs, and honors students specifically, benefit the institution at large by “raising the stakes for all students” (96). He argued that, as honors students participate in their non-honors classes, they often “ask questions that transform lectures and discussions into moments of uncertainty, ambiguity or wonder; and they have the potential to inspire or provoke other students to search for answers on their own” (96). We have seen this dynamic at work with perhaps even greater intensity in the hybrid course context, in which the honors students, inspired by the material and the discussions introduced in the supplementary honors assignments, inject that information and that enthusiasm into general class discussion. Moreover, in most cases the honors students are also required to make a formal presentation of their honors projects and research to the class as a whole.

Hybrid courses also have distinct pedagogical benefits for the faculty who teach them. Each of our hybrid courses is a required course within the major that is part of the faculty member’s regular load, often taught in multiple sections semester after semester. Faculty members who have agreed to develop hybrid courses have reported an influx of new ideas, both methodological and content-based, that naturally carry over to the other sections of the course.

Finally, in some cases hybrid courses have served as a midway point in the creation of a new honors course. They allow for the monitoring of honors student enrollment in the course over time as they provide for the gradual development of an honors curriculum for the course. Repeated semesters with eight to ten students enrolled in the hybrid section may provide a rationale to administrators for adding a full-fledged honors section. Our freshman honors sections of Music Theory and Aural Skills, for instance, began as hybrids and are now distinct honors sections with twelve to fifteen students enrolled each semester.

Hybrid courses have allowed us to rethink the honors classroom, enabling us to look beyond the stark dichotomy between honors and non-honors courses. As our honors curriculum adapts to new demands and needs, this flexible format brings honors and non-honors classroom experiences together, increases the visibility of honors on campus, allows the kinds of experimentation that provide faculty with new perspectives and ideas, offers a vehicle for new honors course development, enhances the overall honors experience for our honors students, and meets a practical and immediate need for our honors students looking for more options for earning honors credit.

REFERENCE

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