

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS DARTMOUTH HONORS COLLEGE

FACULTY HANDBOOK

Academic Year: 2025

This handbook serves as a guide for faculty members engaging with the Honors College at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. It provides essential information on academic policies, teaching expectations, and available resources.

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1. Overview

Honors courses, regardless of type, are expected to be intellectually challenging through a deeper or broader exploration of the topic, an increased level of intellectual engagement and enhancement, and a teaching approach that gives students an increased responsibility for maximizing the level of learning. Students should be involved in the direction of the course (e.g., spending more time on a topic of interest, choosing assessment methods, etc).

Honors courses are not necessarily harder than non-honors courses nor are they more work, but they do tend to be more complex and oftentimes include more sophisticated course material. Simply increasing the workload of a non-honors course does not make it an honors course. Honors courses should make students think critically; apply in-class knowledge to real-world problems; engage in meaningful ways with the material, classmates, and professors; work with both primary and secondary sources; and synthesize information from their experiences and other courses.

This handbook will provide an overview of the learning outcomes, types of honors courses, highlight some best practices in teaching them, and give examples of assignments, activities, and assessment.

2. Learning Goals and Outcomes

The overall aim of the UMassD Honors College is for students to become critical consumers of information who can apply knowledge in creative and novel ways, appreciate different viewpoints, and effectively advocate for empirically supported positions.

The process of becoming critical consumers of information begins in HON101, where students are introduced to concepts such as logical fallacies, cognitive biases, source evaluation, and interpreting probabilities. HON201 courses should reinforce a selection of these skills by focusing on certain learning outcomes (see below for details). The process culminates in the students' APEX, which represents an original and individual contribution to their chosen field. For HON courses, faculty should make it clear to students how the course is reinforcing evidence-based reasoning/thinking and decision making.

With this aim in mind, the Honors College has adopted four broad curricular goals. In each of these areas, there are specific, objective, measurable outcomes that guide our curriculum and course objectives. As appropriate for an honors education, these outcomes focus heavily on analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Faculty teaching an honors course, regardless of type, should choose at least one of the specific outcomes from at least two of the learning goals to include on their syllabus. For example, a course could list *Critically evaluate and critique the knowledgebase within an area of inquiry* from the Develop Rigorous Scholarly Inquiry Skills learning goal and *Synthesize findings, ideas, and/or theories in innovative ways* from the Promote Creativity and Divergent/convergent Thinking Skills learning goal. Note that this is the minimum and faculty

can choose to include more. Below, you will find the learning goals, the specific outcomes, and examples of assignments.

Learning Goal 1: Develop rigorous scholarly inquiry skills

- **Learning Outcome 1: Use a systematic approach in assessing evidence, data, context, and interpretations**
 - Myth busting
 - Recognizing fake news
 - Comparing primary articles with media reports
 - Data visualization activities
- **Learning Outcome 2: Critically evaluate and critique the knowledgebase within an area of inquiry**
 - Annotated bibliography
 - Critical review of literature
 - Critical synthesis paper outlining weaknesses, opportunities, and/or that identifies areas of growth in a field
- **Learning Outcome 3: Identify gaps in understanding (metacognition)**
 - Assessment wrapper
 - https://www.clemson.edu/otei/resources/cognitive_exam-wrapper
 - <https://otl.du.edu/plan-a-course/teaching-resources/assignmentexam-wrappers/>
 - Metacognitive prompt activity
 - <https://www.globalmetacognition.com/copy-of-free-metacognition-activity>
 - <https://teaching.uoregon.edu/resources/active-learning-metacognition>
 - Problem-solving process: Give students a problem set and ask them to write down how they solved each problem. Or have them work with a partner and work out problems out loud, step by step.
- **Learning Outcome 4: Formulate and pursue original scholarly endeavors**
 - Write a mini grant application or letter of intent using the format of a relevant funding agency.
 - Develop research questions or scholarly questions and methods to answer those questions for topics throughout the semester.

Learning Goal 2: Promote creativity and divergent/convergent thinking skills

- **Learning Outcome 1: Synthesize findings, ideas, and/or theories in innovative ways**
 - Make a similarity/difference table for two or three competing theories along with a synthesis paper (see <https://www.biointeractive.org/sites/default/files/MakingofTheory-StudentHO-film.pdf> for example)

- Divergent thinking activity (e.g., <https://makeamarkstudios.com/fostering-divergent-thinking-skills-in-your-art-class/>)
- Divergent/Convergent Thinking Activity (<https://psychologycompass.com/blog/creative/>)
- Have students pick two seemingly unrelated topics from class and ask them to find a way to link them.
- Synthesizing sources activity (see <https://guides.lib.utexas.edu/c.php?g=674020&p=4746610>)
- **Learning Outcome 2: Apply existing skills in different settings**
 - Ask students to work in interdisciplinary teams and have them solve a problem in a way that capitalizes on the overall knowledge of the group (e.g., an engineer and art student could work on clean drinking water by developing a desalination system and a way to effectively encourage people to save water).
 - Ask students to explore job opportunities in seemingly unrelated fields and write about how they could contribute (e.g., a psychology major might explore jobs in international affairs, or a math major exploring jobs in casinos).
- **Learning Outcome 3: Formulate solutions to novel problems**
 - Future problem-solving activity: Ask student to think about a problem that might not exist yet and use a systematic approach to developing solutions
 - <https://resources.futureproblemsolving.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/FPS-6-Step-Infographic-Flyer.pdf>
 - <https://resources.futureproblemsolving.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/FPS-Underlying-Problem-Identification-Tool.pdf>

Learning Goal 3: Hone oral and written communication skills

- **Learning Outcome 1: Clearly explain (orally and in writing) findings, thoughts, ideas to both experts and non-experts**
 - Develop informational material for a general audience on a class topic (e.g., brochure, poster, how-to manual, etc).
 - Include several short presentations for students in class.
 - Give students either real or hypothetical findings and ask them to write an abstract appropriate for an expert audience (e.g., journal abstract) and an abstract for a general audience.
 - Edit popular media accounts of news related to the field to be more accurate (e.g., a news article says that scientists found a cure for cancer, but the actual study was in mice and only focused on one type of cancer).
 - Ask students to take pictures of pamphlets, flyers, etc around campus and then evaluate them using Robin William’s four basic principles (see <https://wiredcraft.com/blog/robin-williams-four-basic-design-principles-for-non-designers/>)

- Peer review exercises
- **Learning Outcome 2: Respectfully and civically debate positions with people who may disagree**
 - Classroom debates
 - Rhetorical mad libs (<https://teachingwriting.stanford.edu/rhetorical-mad-libs>)
 - Take an impromptu stand (see <https://teachingwriting.stanford.edu/take-stand-impromptu-presentation>)

Learning Goal 4: Appreciate diversity of culture, context and perspective at local, national, and international levels

- **Learning Outcome 1: Evaluate the potential of differences as something other than deficits**
 - Read <https://taramortimer.wordpress.ncsu.edu/2018/01/15/difference-vs-deficit-the-important-distinction-in-language/> and explore a topic through the difference vs deficit lens
 - Examine an idea that was originally dismissed because the creator was “different.” How or why did it become accepted (or not)?
- **Learning Outcome 2: Integrate the role of context and culture into understanding others’ thoughts, attitudes, and behavior**
 - Examine and report on how different cultures or groups approach the same problem (e.g., child rearing) and reflect on why one is thought to be “better” and if it is actually the case.
 - Here is a long list of lesson plans on race and racism that could be modified for different purposes if needed:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/04/learning/lesson-plans/resources-for-teaching-about-race-and-racism-with-the-new-york-times.html>
 - Activities that address cognitive biases (e.g., <https://positivepsychology.com/cognitive-biases/>).
 - Explore different ways that topics are taught (e.g., methods by which math is taught at the grade school level).

3. Types of Honors Courses

There are four types of honors courses that students can take to fulfill the college credit requirement: (a) honors college courses that have an HON prefix, (b) honors sections of departmental courses that will have an “H” suffix, (c) carve-out courses that have dedicated honors seats within a non-honors course and are identifiable with a separate section number tagged with an H, and (d) honors contracts. Honors students can also earn credits towards their honors course requirements by taking graduate courses. To count towards the honor’s requirements, students must earn a B or better.

3.1 Honors College Courses

These courses are offered directly from the Honors College and are taught by honors faculty or honors-affiliated faculty. Only honors students can enroll in these courses. HON101 and HON301 each have a standard framework and specific learning outcomes but allow faculty to modify the course assignments and content to fit within their expertise. The HON201, 202, and 203 courses fulfill University Studies requirements 4A, 4B, and 4C, respectively. The topics of these courses vary and are proposed by faculty. These courses have an enrollment cap of 20 students and are typically of interest to an interdisciplinary student audience. Regardless of topic, these courses should reinforce the critical evaluation of information.

3.2. Honors Sections of Departmental Courses

Honors sections are offered through a department and have the departmental prefix with an “H” suffix to indicate that it is an honors section. Depending on the course, there may be non-majors or majors only enrolled. These courses are also capped at 20. Although the name of the course might be the same as a non-honors course (e.g., PSY101-1 vs PSY101-2H), the content and/or delivery of the course should differ. Again, it should be emphasized that an honors section should not just include more work and that these sections should be qualitatively, not quantitatively, different from non-honors sections. This might mean different assignments, different readings (e.g., less textbook material and more primary material), different assessments, etc.

3.3 Honors Carve-outs

Honors carve-outs are essentially a section (with an H suffix) within a course. In these cases, students in the honors section attend the same lectures as the non-honors section but will have a different syllabus, assignments, tests, and/or activities that distinguish their section from the larger course. For example, there are two Biology courses with honors carve-outs that include an hour-long recitation each week where students discuss and practice topics in more depth. The differences should not simply be extra assignments/papers. In fact, many faculty members will replace a regular assignment with a more “in-depth” assignment. The work given to the honors students should focus on critical evaluation of information, synthesis of material (within the course or in a multi-disciplinary way), communication, etc. Regardless of the work, it should add depth or breadth to the course experience.

Faculty who teach carve-outs need to include the following information on the syllabus for the Honors section:

- The honors-specific learning outcomes for the honors section
- A clear description of how the honors section is different from the non-honors section, including, but not limited to:
 - Grading criteria and grade calculation
 - Extra assignments or meeting times
 - Course expectations and due dates

The following are some ideas for carve-out sections. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list, and faculty can create their own approach if it meets the standards for Honors courses.

- A recitation for honors students that focuses on a more in-depth understanding of course topics (this needs to be approved through Curriculog due to the additional meeting time so please contact the Honors Dean or Faculty Director for more information).
- A series of small group projects or experiments that can be written up and/or presented to the class.
- Team projects that create student resources throughout the semester, such as a class “wiki.”
- Team projects that create resources that are accessible to the general public (e.g., a “for dummies” guide).
- Creating a lesson plan and homework assignments for a topic not covered in class that the students or professor can use for the rest of the class.
- Individual or small group lectures or presentations to the class.
- A book or film club in which students read fiction or non-fiction books (or watch movies) and compare it with what they learned in class.
- Replace a short paper assignment with an interview assignment in which the student develops questions and reports/interprets the results.
- Ask students to attend a talk, exhibition, presentation, government meeting (e.g., city council), or other event and report their experience to class along with how it relates to course material.

3.4 Honors Contracts

Honors contracts allow students to “honorize” non-honors courses. An honors contract is a negotiated agreement between a student, a course instructor, and the Honors Dean that enables the student to take a non-honors course for Honors credit. The honors contract is a useful alternative to regular honors courses for students with particularly inflexible schedules and/or few elective courses. The contract also enables the student to undertake more advanced study than the course's constraints normally allow.

A course contracted for honors credit carries the same number of credit hours as the non-honors version of the course. However, "Honors" appears on the transcript, and all credits earned count toward graduation as a Commonwealth Scholar, provided that the final course grade is B or better.

Importantly, the contracted work does not determine the final course grade. Final grades reflect the quality and content of the regular assigned work in the course. The contracted work, clearly outlined in the course contract approval form, is graded as pass/fail. For example, if the student earns a:

- B or better in the course and satisfactorily completes the contracted work, the credits WILL count towards the honors requirements.

- B or better in the course but does not complete the contracted work, the student still earns that grade in the course, but it will NOT count towards the required number of honors credits needed to graduate as a Commonwealth Scholar.
- B- or lower in the course, it will not count towards the honors requirements regardless of the contracted work (this is a state-wide Commonwealth Honors requirement).

The following restrictions apply:

- No more than six credits of Honors contract coursework may be counted toward the required 21 hours of honors coursework. Exceptions must be approved in advance by the Honors Director.
- 100-level courses cannot be contracted for honors credit. Exceptions must be approved by the Honors Dean before the beginning of the semester.
- Contracted courses must be taken for a letter grade.
- The consequences for failure to complete the work to the instructor's satisfaction must be clearly stated in the contract. Typically, it means the course will not receive the honors designation on the transcript and will not count toward honors requirements for graduation.

The honors contract process begins with the negotiation of an individualized syllabus with the course instructor. The student then submits a contract for approval by the Honors Dean. The contract must include the following information:

- Statement on precisely how the project differs from the regular work of the class.
- A clear description of what, why, and how the work will be completed and what the final product will be.
- An explicit timetable for meetings with the course instructor, submission of the components or drafts of the project, and submission of the final product. The deadline can be no later than the scheduled final exam period for the course.
- A clear statement of the criteria used to evaluate the contracted work (i.e., the minimum requirements that must be met to be judged acceptable).
- A clear and explicit statement on what will happen if the contracted work is not satisfactory.

The contracted component of the course can take many forms. The Honors College does, however, discourage just adding an extra paper to the student's workload. That said, it is sometimes appropriate to assign an extra paper if the purpose is clearly articulated, and it is the most straightforward way for the student to delve deeper into a topic. Here are some ideas, broken up by field, that may help you get started. Note that any of these ideas can be used by any field and this is by no means an exhaustive list.

3.4.1 Social Science, Science, Math, or Engineering

- Work on a research project with the faculty member on a topic related to class (keep in mind the scope of the project should not be the same as an independent study or APEX).

- Design a product or algorithm that does a certain task, uses particular methods, and/or combines different areas covered in class.
- Analyze existing data or classroom data and present it to class.
- Develop some type of visualization to clearly communicate classroom topics to a lay audience.
- Participate in a community or service-learning opportunity and either write or present how the experience related to class topics.
- Debunk myths related to the field of study and present findings to class.
- Develop study guides that faculty may use in future sections of the course.
- Develop course material and lead a lecture.
- Write about the history of a particular topic and how the field may develop in the future.

3.4.2 Arts/Humanities

- Produce a creative work (e.g., characters, story, painting, illustration, visualization, game) that illustrates a particular topic or concept.
- Imagine if a classic work was completed in a different context (e.g., historical era, set in a different country, the gender/status/identity of the characters, etc.). Write or create a work that illustrates this thinking and present it to class or write a paper.
- Write/present an alternative history of a major event (e.g., if Germany won WW1, the development of nuclear fusion energy, etc.).
- Write a critique of a classic or modern work.
- Evaluate the arguments of opposing viewpoints on a relevant topic.
- Critique advertisements or promotional material in terms of logical fallacies or cognitive heuristics.

3.4.3 Business

- Create a marketing plan for an existing or new product.
- Investigate the failure of a business and write/present your findings.
- Interview managers/leaders in a particular sector and synthesize the findings with course material.
- Create a financial literacy guide for students.
- Investigate differences/similarities between international businesses in a particular sector.

4. Summary of Best Practices for Honors Teaching

According to the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), an honors education “ignites passion for lifelong learning and encourages student creativity, collaboration, and leadership in the classroom and beyond.” In general, this means that honors courses should include:

- Activities in and out of the classroom that provide measurably more complex understanding and critical evaluation of course concepts
- Creative and experiential learning opportunities

- A supportive student-centered learning environment
- The promotion of a close community with other students and faculty

Given that there are dozens of books dedicated to honors pedagogy, this handbook will focus on the larger picture and provide some general guidance. These strategies are based on findings from an Honors ad-hoc Committee, the components of an honors education as defined by the NCHC, and feedback from faculty and students. One way to think about honors courses is that they are more akin to a graduate course than they are to an undergraduate course.

4.1 Quality over Quantity

Honors courses should not necessarily cover MORE material or have MORE homework than non-honors courses, but the material and assignments should be more engaging, collaborative, innovative, focused on creativity, etc. Honors students are very good at recognizing “busy work” and appreciate the opportunity to display their critical thinking skills and ability to engage with material in meaningful ways.

4.2 Exams

Based on Bloom’s taxonomy, honors courses should not necessarily emphasize memorization of content. Instead, students should be encouraged to apply and critique information. Thus, multiple choice exams are not the optimal testing approach in honors courses. In fact, many honors courses do not include exams at all (this is completely up to you). If you decide to have exams, here are some ideas:

- Short-answer essay questions that do not have one correct answer but are graded on how well the student defends their response, position, etc.
- Giving students answers to an essay question that range from bad to good. Have the students create their own rubric for grading the responses. Then, give the students a related essay topic to answer and grade them using this rubric (this is also a great way to encourage active participation and a sense of ownership in the class).
- Include application questions that cannot simply be answered using course material (e.g., ask students to give examples from their own lives). For example,
 - Draw a diagram or visual representation of topics
 - Develop multiple solutions, pick the one they believe is better, and walk through that decision-making process
 - Come up with ways that could improve a research study
- Ask questions that make students consider metacognition, such as:
 - What information do you think you will need to answer this question and where could you find it?
 - What is the purpose of this exam question?
 - How will you know when the problem is solved or completed?

4.3 Grading

Grades in honors courses are generally higher than non-honors courses, as honors students are some of the strongest on campus. This is not a bad thing and giving all A's and B's when the class has performed at that level is not at all problematic nor is it viewed as grade inflation.

4.4 Assignments and Flexibility

Honors students appreciate being held accountable but also appreciate some level of flexibility due to the rigors of their education. Letting students have input on things (e.g., due dates, length of papers, type of exam, etc.) is an easy way to encourage a sense of ownership and responsibility. Giving students options on how to complete assignments is also an option. For example, the instructor could assign a general period in a history course and let students pick the topic to discuss. Or there could be a specific topic but the students can choose the format of their submission (e.g., paper, blog, podcast, class talk). Students should be encouraged to try new things and to understand that in the "real world" they might not have explicit rubrics to work from or detailed instructions for a task. Some students are uncomfortable with the lack of details, but if they understand that it is a safe place to develop new skills in defining project scopes or aims, be creative in their approach, and/or try new things, the students enjoy the process.

4.5 Course Material

As with all students, there is heterogeneity in how individual students best learn. Thus, using a variety of technologies, sources, and teaching methods is a good way to make sure students stay engaged.

4.5.1 Readings

Honors courses should use academic sources as much as possible (e.g., primary articles, review articles, meta-analytic articles, etc.). Textbooks are fine, but they should be augmented with more nuanced and complex readings.

4.5.2 Discussion Boards

Discussion boards are a great way to get students engaged with the material. Instructors should take care to not just have students post responses and not engage with others. Requiring structured response questions for small groups of students is one way to do this (i.e., having each student respond to a primary question, then have "response questions" that ask students to evaluate/critique/add to the original poster). Another option is to have students themselves take turns creating the discussion questions and having them go through each response and provide feedback (not necessarily a grade).

Another way to use discussion boards is to create a regular assignment for which the student must apply or investigate topics related to the course material. For example, several faculty use "Application Fridays" where students are given an applied assignment that must be completed over the weekend and responses are posted on a discussion board (e.g., in a health-related class, there is a unit covering community and students were asked to "grade" their hometown

using a rubric designed to measure how healthy or unhealthy a community might be). “Investigation Fridays” are an alternative where students are asked to investigate a topic related to a class topic in much more depth than was covered in class (e.g., debunking a health myth).

4.6 Class Time

Honors courses should be more interactive/active than non-honors courses (i.e., more seminar-like rather than straight lecture). Students should be strongly encouraged to participate and ask questions. Flipping the classroom is one option in which students read material and watch a lecture prior to class and class time is spent applying the material. Students should also be encouraged to work in small groups to create, evaluate, and/or apply course material. Another way to promote active learning and communication skills is to ask students to lead a lecture or discussion.

5. Additional Resources

The NCHC Honors in Practice Online Archive (see below) has links to hundreds of great articles. If you ever have any questions, again please feel free to reach out to the Faculty Director of the Honors College.

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[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305411691 Teaching for excellence honors pedagogies revealed](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305411691_Teaching_for_excellence_honors_pedagogies_revealed).

Zubizarreta, John. "The Learning Portfolio for Improvement." Inspiring Exemplary Teaching and Learning: Perspectives on Teaching Academically Talented College Students, edited by Larry Clark and John Zubizarreta, Commercial Printing Company, 2008, pp. 121–36.