

Teaching in the Merrimack Honors Program

Guidelines for Courses

The Merrimack College Honors Program offers a rigorous academic experience to some of the College's best students. It affords faculty an opportunity to teach material they are passionate about to students who will respond with interest and involvement.

Teaching an Honors course

Honors courses promote active learning in community with others leading to transformative experiences. All Merrimack faculty are welcome and encouraged to teach in the Merrimack College Honors Program.

Given the Program's purpose of providing a rigorous academic experience, a proposed honors course, section, or lab should be more challenging than a non-honors course in some significant respect. But another way to envision an honors course is for interested faculty to begin by picturing the students they will be teaching. Their analytic, quantitative, and communication skills place them among the best students at the College. Honors Program students are ready to be challenged.

Course design

At the broadest level, the Program seeks courses that are consistent with one or more of its over-arching pedagogical goals: Learning in Community, Active Learning and Transformative Experience as outlined in the Vision statement.

Honors courses can meet one or more of these goals in a variety of ways, depending on a course's subject matter, the interests of the professor, and the involvement of other faculty and students. Course material may be covered more quickly and in greater depth on the assumption that students will not need as much help to understand the text. Students may be asked to conduct original research, whether with source documents, in the field, or in the lab. The instructor may choose a special focus or emphasis not appropriate for a typical undergraduate course. Sustained and critical reflection on a subject's methodology could be central. Team-taught and interdisciplinary courses would be especially appropriate.

An experiential dimension is strongly encouraged. This may include problem-based and project-based learning, the creation of learning portfolios, and student-peer evaluations. Students may be asked to take an active role in course design and assessment. In all experiential learning, an opportunity to reflect on what is experienced is crucial.

A service learning component (e.g., volunteer work at an off-campus community center) is NOT required for honors courses. Straight lecturing that puts the student in the position of passive recipient is strongly discouraged. It should be noted in particular that an honors course isn't simply "harder" or a course that demands "extra work." Adding a term paper or exam to current course requirements does not in and of itself justify the honors designation. A creative and active approach to content and learning does.

Practical issues

Honors sections are capped at 15 students and are open only to students enrolled in the Honors Program. To ensure that outstanding students not in the Program can have access to courses needed for a major or minor, non-honors students of high academic standing may be admitted to a course with the permission of the instructor, and upon consultation with the Program director.

Proposals for honors courses may be submitted to the Program Director at any time, though due dates for submitting course schedules to the Deans should be kept in mind. The proposal should briefly describe the course and the specific ways in which it satisfies the pedagogical goals of the Program. If the course is an honors section of an existing course, the instructor should indicate how the honors version goes beyond the non-honors version. The course syllabus should also include a paragraph explaining to students what makes the course an honors course (see sample below). No special form is required for the proposal. Once approved, the course may be repeated in future semesters with no additional approval needed.

Next Steps

The Program Director and members of the Honors Program Committee are happy to consult with interested faculty in developing appropriate courses, both before and after a proposal is submitted. The intent is to be supportive and collaborative, and not to set up obstacles. Faculty are encouraged to be both creative and demanding. Your participation is essential to the Program's success and to the success of our students.

Example of honors justification from the syllabus for PHL1000H as taught by Prof. Wians:

All honors courses promote active learning in community with others leading to transformative experiences. PHL1000H does so in an especially direct way. The theme of the course is nothing less than the pursuit of self-knowledge. At least since the time of Socrates in the 4th century BCE, this pursuit has required active reflection on the part of the seeker, and has led to profound personal transformations. But while the goal of the course is self-knowledge, the pursuit will be conducted through active engagement with others—through in-class discussion, group projects, and (I hope) continued conversations outside of class. And unlike most non-honors courses, PHL1000H will require participants to participate in two events tied to outstanding cultural sites in Boston, i.e. the Boston Symphony and the Museum of Fine Arts. These events will broaden the student's experiences and thus deepen the possibilities of reflection and self-discovery.