**Notes on Teaching & Learning in Honors[[1]](#endnote-1)**

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**For Faculty:** This document aims to provide you with information you can use to identify pedagogies you are already using, and some new ones you may not be, that may be particularly successful with honors students. It also aims to open a dialogue between you and your students about what you expect of them, and what they can expect from you. It is not, however, a surefire recipe for success. Nor is it a mandate. You should not feel required to adopt all of these suggestions. Different strategies will be more effective and appropriate for some teachers and teaching styles than others. The existing literature is hardly as extensive and conclusive as we would like, but we believe that this information will prove useful in developing and teaching your course.

**For Students:** This should provide you with a glimpse into some of the expectations faculty have for you. They will know, of course, that one size does not fit all; but in an effort to create a broadly successful class, they may build on some of these data and the suggestions that follow. This is not, however, a mandate to faculty. You should not expect faculty to adopt all or even most of the suggestions on this list. We do hope, however, that this document will help faculty and students alike identify the expectations they have for one another and to encourage strategies in the classroom that have been found particularly effective among Honors students.

**Appendix**: In the Appendix attached at the end of this document, you will find the research that these suggestions are based on. We encourage you to look at this brief research summary to provide greater understanding of the suggestions listed below.

**FACULTY TIPS — Faculty might try to…**

**Course Development**

* Develop a class based on those aspects of your work that you are most passionate about and that might have broad appeal (a balance to be sure)
* Develop a class that is issue or problem oriented and that explores big, meaningful questions. This will make it easier to employ pedagogies that ask students to use higher order critical thinking.
* Design a class with approximately the same *amount* of reading, homework, and assignments as in your other classes but with different types of readings, prompts, questions and assignments.
* Introduce and test out various theoretical approaches with your students to interpret course material
* Have students identify the parameters of a problem, not just search for solutions to an already articulated one
* Provide the tools and the opportunities for students to make connections between your class and their own lives, their own majors, other disciplines and current affairs
* Engage students in questions that require abstract thought and synthesis

**Classroom Strategies**

* Consider whether you identify more with the characteristics of high achievement or giftedness and consider how you can make your classroom a comfortable place for both types of students
* Explicitly identify the goal for class exercises, discussions and assignments *before* you begin. If it is clear that the discussion is intended to test rhetorical strategies, define the parameters of an issue, or help individuals identity their own assumptions and beliefs rather than, for example, come to a conclusion or consensus, this will help students from feeling that the discussion “didn’t go anywhere.”
* Decenter discussions so that peers talk to each other, not just to you. Do this by refusing to interject for a specific amount of time or using some version of a “talking stick” where control of discourse is literally out of your hands.
* Negotiate class discussions where some students may want to focus and identify solutions or correct answers while others may want to spend more time exploring tangential issues.

**Assignments**

* Provide significant flexibility in the choice of topics for major projects
* Create and share grading rubrics with students when a task is first assigned
* Provide students regular opportunities to reflect on the material and their work

**Grading**

* Grade students according to mastery as expected and compared to the general student body. Typically, the grades in Honors classes are higher than in non-honors classes because you have a group that skews to the top. While it may be tempting to dismiss student concerns about grades, it is important to remember that we are part of an academic system, including the Honors Program, that pays close attention to grades. As Laird Edman argues in his conclusion to the monograph *Teaching and Learning in Honors*, “Listening to student concerns and carefully considering grading policies should be a part of any good honors pedagogy” (2002:107).
* Scaffold the class with small, graded assignments that have little impact on the final grade but provide feedback so that students can learn your expectations before major assignments.
* Provide constructive feedback for all grades, including As, working to encourage the idea that there is always more to explore.
* Consider being explicit that grades are indications of mastery at a moment in time, not an evaluation of intelligence or personal worth. Help encourage a growth mindset (rather than a fixed mindset) among the students by orienting them to see their work as opportunities to develop deeper and deeper mastery.

**STUDENT TIPS — Students might try to…**

**Learning Approach**

* Consider class as an opportunity to learn something that may be far outside your professed range of interests, with a cohort of bright peers
* Figure out whether you identify more with the characteristics of high achievement or giftedness and consider how you might strive to develop both sets of qualities while engaging with peers whose qualities may differ
* Identify your own intrinsic motivators—those things that drive you and interest you—and consider how you can apply them in the completion of coursework
* Take intellectual risks
* Actively work to make connections between course content and your personal, intellectual, and/or career interests
* Keep in mind that your faculty member is as invested in making the class an excellent learning experience and approach conversations and feedback with the professor collegially and constructively

**Classroom Strategies**

* Assume responsibility for ensuring discussions are collegial and intellectually stimulating. Police yourself from sharing wildly irrelevant experiences, but be willing to explore interesting ideas with your peers
* Help create a supportive environment for discussion by focusing on ideas and not allowing personality conflicts among a peer group you know well to interfere or stifle open discourse.

**Assignments**

* Use assignments as an opportunity to challenge yourself: whether to think more creatively, address new theories or bodies of scholarship, or tackle thornier questions. What is challenging to one student may not be challenging to another; it will often be up to you to challenge yourself.

**APPENDIX**

Here you will find the research that these tips above are based on. We encourage you to look at this brief research summary to provide greater understanding of the suggestions listed below.

**Characteristics of Honors Students**

First, there is no one type of honors students. That said, there are attributes that many honors students have, whether because we have selected for them in how we invite students into the program (such as high GPAs and SAT scores), or because they are typically shared by high achieving and gifted students.

Honors programs often attract students who might be roughly classified as high achieving and/or gifted. These terms are often used interchangeably, but they capture two sets of characteristics applicable to many Honors students, though a single student may not always keep to one category. While this chart was developed for children, it has been applied to Honors students in college (Guzy 2008, adapted from Szabo 1989). Please note: As with many binary systems, this model is more useful heuristically than descriptively.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **High Achievers** | **Gifted Students** |
| Know the answers | Ask the questions |
| Are interested | Are curious |
| Have good ideas | Have wild or unexpected ideas |
| Understand ideas | Construct abstracts |
| Complete assignments | Initiate projects |
| Enjoy school | Enjoy learning |
| Are technicians | Are inventors |
| Grasp meaning | Draw inferences |
| Enjoy peers | Prefer adults |
| Learn with ease | Already know |
| Listen with interest | Demonstrate strong opinions |
| Absorb information | Manipulate information |
| Copy accurately | Create new designs |
| Are receptive | Are critical |
| Achieve mastery in 3–8 repetitions | Achieve mastery in 1–2 repetitions |
| Top group | Beyond the group |

**Behavioral differences with non-Honors students3**

* Meet with faculty more often outside of class
* Prepare longer for class
* Spend more time revising papers
* Ask more questions in class
* Focus more on grades
* Skip class less often
* Watch less TV
* Drink less alcohol
* At Elon, group dynamics from the program will emerge in the classroom

**Cognitive Differences**

* Greater preference for abstract, conceptual and integrative reflection3
* More intuitive, suggesting more creativity and ability to engage in abstract thought3,5
* Capable and interested in more abstract thinking, ideas and concepts5
* Enjoy reflective thought5
* Less influenced by commonly professed ideas5
* Better able to perform deep processing and elaborative processing, meaning that are typically good at actively organizing and critically evaluating information3
* Better at fact retention3
* More “conceptually-set": see facts as smaller elements in a larger scheme; they prefer to learn principles, theories, and relationships that link separate facts together5
* Prefer integrative thought and learning5
* More favorably affected by being taught in small classes than less intellectual able students16

**Perceptions and Assumptions**

Faculty often assume that honors students are more autonomous, responsible, and motivated, particularly intrinsically motivated.2,3, 9, 10, 18, 22, 24 Without research to support these beliefs, one should be careful not to put too much weight into these assumptions.

**Characteristics of Effective Honors Teachers**

**Research and Students agree that the best honors teachers…**

* are enthusiastic, passionate, inspiring 11, 21, 22, 23
* operate as a guide; partners with students in learning; guides in the classroom rather than “the sage on the stage”10, 21, 23
* do not attempt to cover twice the material; rather challenge students with greater depth and more connections10, 17, 21
* accept and incorporate criticism11, 17, 21

**Research also suggests the best Honors faculty…21**

* show their students how the subject affects them as people, how they apply both the content and the approach of their discipline to their daily lives
* do not expect students to be reflections or clones of the professor
* remember how it feels to be a learner, a novice
* enjoy a challenge from students and can say, "I don't know"
* take some risks

**Students also say the best Honors faculty…**

* go outside the book, spark student intellectually like a moderator, not obsessed with covering all the material, leave room for unexpected learning23
* are adaptive, flexible23
* challenge them11, 22
* are friendly, accessible outside of class17, 22
* mentoring relationship with faculty22
* are creative23
* exhibit expertise**11**

**Effective Honors Class Pedagogies**

**Research and Students agree that the best honors teachers…**

* engage students with discussion, which studies show to be integral to active learning, critical thinking, and reflection, as well as higher order thinking and retention of knowledge.2, 11, 15, 16, 17, 20, 24
* create a supportive learning environment; encourage improvement.13, 22, 23
* Provide frequent, timely, and constructive feedback, both to individuals as well as on group work such as classroom discussions.11, 17, 24
* Empower students to take ownership of course material, often by encouraging connections between course material and student’s personal interests.21, 22

**Research also suggests Honors faculty should…**

* place a premium on active-learning strategies that engage students in integration, application, reflection, and self-assessment.21, 24
* focus on construction of knowledge and wisdom as opposed to data and information.8
* develop courses that are issue and question-centered.20

**Students also say they like when Honors faculty…**

* engage them in tackling big, meaningful questions.11
* articulate the significance and relevance of the work they are engaged in.11
* provide clear organization and structure.11
* scaffold research projects.11, 17
* provide clear goals for assignments.11
* give frequent and purposeful assignments11, 17
* assign a variety of readings, work, media, etc. with substantial depth.11
* help make connections between diverse readings, topics, themes, etc. 11
* provide clear and consistent grading criteria/practices.11, 17, 23
* use questions to help students think for themselves.23
* use humor.23

**Common Goals for Honors Courses**

The Honors Program at Elon asks that all Honors courses meet specific learning goals appropriate to the type of class: whether GST110, the Winter Term Course in Turkey, First-Year Disciplinary Courses, Sophomore Team-Taught Courses, or Sophomore Creative Seminar Courses (for the goals for these courses, please see the Honors website under “Faculty / Teaching Honors Courses”). In addition to these goals, Honors faculty often set the following goals as appropriate for Honors students:

* self-reflectiveness
* ability to reason
* ability to express themselves in speech and writing appropriate to the discourse community while remaining authentic to the student's individuality
* ability to integrate and contextualize information
* passion for learning and sense of wonder
* ability both to collaborate and to work independently
* appreciation of the common humanity of all people and gratitude for human differences
* capacity to commit to a position, recognize that it may change, and tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity19

**CONCLUSIONS: What does all this mean for teaching and learning?**

See the Faculty and Student Tips in the main text of this document.

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1. Document compiled by Professor Tom Mould. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)