

University of Massachusetts Lowell
Honors Program
Teaching Honors Courses

Expectations of Honors Courses

What should an honors course experience be? Clearly, there should be more than goes on in an equivalent “non-honors” class. Regardless of whether you are teaching an honors course, a dedicated or concurrent section of a regular course, or an honors-by-contract for an individual in a regular course, the student experience (and hopefully the instructor’s experience as well!) should be enriched.

Courses should be **enriched**, not necessarily enlarged. Honors courses should provide more individualized faculty-student interaction. They should probe subject material more deeply. They should include some presentation or written summary of the experience. Although there may be more work involved, the honors course should not simply be more work. It should be work designed to stimulate interest and discovery in the student.

What do honors courses have in common with regular courses? This one is important. A **syllabus** should be in place that sets out the expectations for student performance and the basis for grading. The roles of student and professor should be clarified. Meeting times beyond classroom should be specified.

- Sample syllabi will be posted here.

What are student and faculty **expectations** of what the honors course experience should be? Here is what students and faculty who were surveyed at University of Northern Iowa* had to say:

Comments from students:

- An honors course should offer more opportunities for the student. These opportunities include more intimate class setting with smaller class sizes, more advantages for participation, outside activities and seminars. They should also more thoroughly study the basic concepts of the course.
- Small class size. More engaging than other classes – more discussion – more projects as opposed to memorization based exams. Create an environment that is highly conducive to interpersonal relations – so that the class is more than just a classroom but an atmosphere that one enjoys being in.
- I expected it to be more challenging in terms of workload, evocativeness, and interaction.

- I think an honors course should be more discussion based, with more emphasis on understanding rather than getting through a set amount of material.
- I would like my honors courses to be more discussion based than non-honors courses, but not so much so that nothing is learned. I want my honors courses to be different than non-honors courses, not just another section with a little different test. What's the point in that? With the discussion, I would like to delve deeper into certain topics, rather than simply skim the surface with an overview.
- I expect an honors class to raise issues other classes don't, spark more discussion, and challenge me mentally. I don't believe more homework as in busywork should be assigned though.
- Should challenge the students to think critically.
- I think that an honors class should involve discussion, rather than lecture. I also believe that it would be better for grades to be determined in ways other than by taking tests. Papers, projects, and speeches, I believe, allow a more thorough investigation of the material and a deeper evaluation of the students' knowledge.
- Challenging coursework, accelerated atmosphere of learning.
- An honors course should cover the subject more thoroughly and apply it to everyday life and other subjects. I don't think we should necessarily be graded harsher, but I do think our projects and assignments could really be used to shape us as individuals.
- I expect to be challenged, to have fun, and to come out with more knowledge than I came in with.
- Honors classes should be more student input oriented. There should be more in-depth discussion than in non-honors classes. There should be more thought & analysis than non-honors & allow students to draw own conclusions rather than simple right/wrong.
- I have discovered that this is a tough question. It should challenge students in a different way, or a more individual level, through introspection and discussion. However, because in any class you have a variety of majors/areas of knowledge, this is very hard to do. I have yet to see it done well, though through no fault of the professors.
- To move at a bit more accelerated rate, as well as focusing on more complex concepts.

Comments from **faculty members who have taught honors courses:**

- The main difference with discussion was that students could actually take an idea and run with it. Discussions could be developed and nurtured. In addition, students were not concerned that they would lose status in front of their peers if

they actually expressed involvement with the subject matter. Therefore, our discussions were animated and very engaging to all.

- I think that the honors classes are extremely well suited for experimentation. In a regular class when I try something new pedagogically, I don't know when it doesn't work out very well if the problem is with the idea or with the abilities of that particular crop of students. With the honors students, if a bright idea doesn't work the problem is more likely to rest with weaknesses in the idea than with the students. I tried several new classroom activities this semester with the honors students that I would never have felt able to risk in a regular class because I would have felt that failure was likely. The ones that worked really well I am going to implement in simplified form in my regular classes.
- In my honors sections, the students range from good to excellent; in my regular sections the students range from dreadful to excellent. This is to express the obvious; not all excellent students are in the Honors Program. So, I guess I look at my honors sections as places where I can experiment with methodologies specifically with an eye to using them eventually with all my students.
- There are two things that I think ought to distinguish honors courses: first, that they be much more rigorous, intellectually challenging and demanding, and second, that they find ways to encourage creativity on the part of students, usually by the sorts of assignments that are given to them.
- I discovered that teaching an honors course was not like teaching an upper division seminar in my department. Though they are bright, I could not assume the same kind of common base knowledge, and so I had to make appropriate adjustments in my plans for the course.
- Honors students cut to the quick faster. They do not need the traditional exposition of the plot when discussing a novel. Instead, you can concentrate more on themes and interpretations. So, it takes half the time to discuss a novel with honors students than with a regular class. (In addition, most of the honors students will actually read the book).

** From the University of Northern Iowa Honors Program website
<http://www.uni.edu/honors/Faculty%20Guide%20for%20Teaching%20in%20Honors.doc>*