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HNRS 400: Implementing a Capstone Research Course for the Western Washington University Honors Program

By researching other university Honor programs' models for upper-division curriculum, I have formulated some suggestions for improving Western Washington University's Honors program for incoming students who might already have a broader range of college experiences in their repertoires, namely Running Start or transfer students, as well as to maximize every student's ability to succeed within the program. My primary suggestion for a revision to the program is to implement a prerequisite class to our capstone project credits, HNRS 490, by introducing a one-credit capstone research course to lend accountability, support, and guidance to students who need to begin their capstone projects. HNRS 400 should be focused on proposal writing, field-specific research, and fostering an environment wherein interdisciplinary thinking skills are exercised. The course should take place either the spring of a student's junior year or the fall quarter of senior year. Its primary goals would be to support students while they draft and develop their capstone proposals, offer guidance for students preparing to begin their projects, promote an interdisciplinary learning environment, and include deadlines for self-directed research. This kind of course will emphasize to students the importance of beginning their projects with enough time to complete them, and offer motivation to students who must either complete the Honors program in a shorter span of time, like students who enter the program with college credit, those who need some external motivation and more deadlines to complete their

work, or students who would benefit from engaging an idea-centered environment that specifically helps them focus on what they want their project to be about. The class will also benefit students who already have a clearly focused goal in mind by bringing them into a peer-mentoring environment and allowing them to inspire and be inspired by the ideas that are generated in the class, as well as allowing them to hone research skills within their particular fields.

Firstly, I want to briefly acknowledge the difference between honors programs and colleges so as to dispel any future confusion about my use of these terms. According to Public University Honors' website, it is typical for an honors college to exist at a university where more distinction is necessary between honors and non honors students, and that difference is realized through more structure, smaller classes, more extensive staff involvement, and separate residence halls. According to the website, programs typically exist in universities that are well established and have already garnered quite a bit of prestige, so that there is not as much of a need to set aside different, more intensive classes for honor students. It is considered exceptional, but not unheard of, when a prestigious university establishes a separate honors college after receiving private donations. This having been said, Western Washington University's honors program functions much more like an honors college, but our official title of "Program" seems to give us a bit more glamour and pull to prospective students who are knowledgeable about this distinction. As I've researched other universities' colleges and programs, I've found that Western is not the only public university to name their model "Program" despite it resembling a college in the definitive sense.

Of the universities within what I'm calling the "Western Region," or Washington, Oregon, Idaho, California, Nevada, Colorado, and Utah, most of the public universities I've examined have established some variation on a one-credit research and project development class to be taken before taking on the credits for their capstone project. Many of these courses are called "Thesis Research" courses, but as the Honors Program at Western intentionally eschews this term due to its implications, I will be referring to the courses as "Capstone Research." While the main goals of these classes have slightly different focuses, they tend to include emphasis, to varying degrees, on developing a proposal, sharpening research skills, providing students with resources, and helping them connect with an advisor for their projects. The differences in course structure seemed often to be due to the size and resources of the particular university, as larger universities often had enough students to separate these research classes by major and have students complete the class through their own major departments; University of California, Davis is an example of this. On the other end of the spectrum for structure, Oregon State University provides just a one-hour workshop at the beginning of each quarter to introduce students to their project requirements. While the benefit of this model is that the workshop can be provided quarterly as opposed to a once in the academic year course, the guidelines that our program provides in PDF format render a workshop unnecessary, especially since increased accountability for students will be a feature of HNRS 400. The common denominators for many of the other state universities within the state of Washington, namely Central Washington University and Washington State University (as well as others in the Western Region) have a model that is centered around the drafting of a project proposal and conducting research in order to formulate the proposal. I think that this is the best model to adopt for HNRS 400 at Western.

As a mid-range university with a well established Honors program, it will be beneficial to introduce a class that brings Honors students together during their junior and senior years at Western and adds more structure to the upper division Honors curriculum. The course that I propose emphasizes the development of ideas by promoting an interdisciplinary, discussion-based environment that also allows students to hone their research skills within their own particular field of interest.

My recommendations for the capstone research course for the Honors program at Western include incorporating a Canvas component into the course, a proposal drafting workshop, one exercise for strengthening major-specific research skills and discovering potential project topics, an interdisciplinary thinking component, and establishing a partnership with the Research-Writing Studio. The Research-Writing Studio partnership and guidelines are meant to supplement the one-credit course I'm proposing. A capstone research course will not only provide more accountability and structure to students within the program, but allow students with a shorter amount of time between their first day at Western and graduation some extra time to delve into their respective interests and decided upon a research topic for their projects.

While a partnership with the Research-Writing Studio is supplementary, I think that it will enhance the course by providing students with additional resources when conducting the preliminary research on potential project topics, and providing assistance, if needed, with drafting a focused proposal. Ideally, a partnership with the studio will include having students meet in small groups at the studio to discuss their research. The studio would provide space and structure for small group workshop exercises, and spaces for small groups to meet with each other to complete an interdisciplinary discussion or work on developing their proposals. This

partnership would be particularly critical if the course is structured mostly by Canvas, and there is no established classroom for students to meet as a large group weekly.

As the number of students participating in the course might be too large to reasonably allow for a weekly meeting with group discussion, Canvas would be an excellent platform for the course. It will allow for the organization of students into two sets of groups, one intentionally consisting of mixed majors for interdisciplinary discussion, and another set of groups established as “home-bases” for those with the same or similar majors. By incorporating Canvas into the course structure so that a couple sets of groups can be established within each class, one set of groups can be oriented toward interdisciplinary interaction and contain students of varied academic backgrounds, while another set of groups will be designated by major. If a particular major group contains less than three students, this cluster should be added to a larger major group that shares the most similar background. For example, if one major group has five creative writing students and another would contain only two literature students, the group with the literature students should be added to the creative writing group so that each group has enough participants of similar background knowledge. The same major groups may not necessarily require weekly discussion posts, but act as a bridge to facilitate communication between students of the same major, and allow them to share their expertise with each other and provide a peer-mentoring component to the course. Assignments can also be submitted through the assignments feature of Canvas, and discussion boards can propose weekly discussion topics for interdisciplinary groups to consider and post about, possibly at an average of one post per week. A question posed for interdisciplinary groups might present students with a scenario or problem that requires thinking skills from multiple fields to be integrated in order to be solved, and

students can view each other's discussion posts to glean new insight into how to approach roadblocks that arise when conducting research. A Canvas component will also facilitate each student's communication with the instructor of the course, who will also be monitoring the weekly discussion posts.

HNRS 400 will be applicable for all majors and assist students who wish to conduct either interdisciplinary or traditional research for their projects. A research exercise taking place within the beginning few weeks of the course will allow students to strengthen their major-specific research skills while exploring topics of interest. The culmination of this exercise should be a tentative, but well-thought-out project topic and goal for each student. Once they have chosen a topic, students can begin drafting a project proposal. First drafts of a proposal should be due near the beginning of the latter half of the quarter, around weeks six or seven. The initial research exercise will focus discussion mainly between students in each "home-base" major group, as the exercise requires students to exercise research tools particular to their own fields in order to decide upon a solid, foundational topic. Once students have found a topic and begun drafting their proposals, interdisciplinary discussion invites students to explore additional avenues of thought and new ways of looking at their topic and the implications of their project.

The class may encourage students to look at the issue they are tackling from a different angle or perspective because of the course won't be completely segregated departmentally. Not separating students by department will also make the class easier to establish, as only one, rather than multiple, is sufficient. While larger schools seem to encourage students from different disciplines to take an already established, non-Honors research course in their own field to help

develop their theses, many smaller schools seem to be successful with one Honors directed class for students of all disciplines, led by one or more instructor.

The course will have a few deadlines, but milestones for each student will be emphasized for successful completion. For example, one student might already have an advisor and have started to unofficially work on their project when they take the course. Their goals in this course would then be to deepen their research, develop a complete proposal, and display progress on their project by the tenth week of the course. A student who has no lead on what their project might be at the start of the course should have contacted a potential advisor by the end of the course, and drafted and submitted a proposal for their project. The goal for the end of the course should be, at the very least, a project proposal to be submitted to the department. As a one credit course, class meetings should be either weekly hour-long sessions or a requirement for small groups to meet in person for hour-long sessions 2-3 times per quarter. Meeting format should hinge on class size- if the class is too large to meet productively once per week, independent, student-led small group meetings should be required. During meetings, students can discuss their individual needs and goals with with each other or an instructor, if present. The first week of the course should be used to evaluate the progress and status of the particular group of students. Once the instructor has a better understanding of the group's needs, instruction can be tailored and focused toward the group's needs.

The course should allow for instruction to be tailored to the particular makeup and needs of each class. The challenge when organizing this course will be to balance each student's individual needs and thesis development while fostering an open, collaborative, and interdisciplinary environment. While research skills within each discipline should be a main

focus, most honors students should be fairly comfortable with the research skills that are necessary to their own discipline by the time they take HNRS 400. Therefore, methods of interdisciplinary thinking should be explored during the latter part of the course as a way to expand each student's perspective and approach to their projects. The goal of the interdisciplinary discussion posts is to inspire students to think about the topic that they have chosen in new ways, so that they can develop a deep understanding of the topic that they are exploring. Without an interdisciplinary component, students will be sequestered into their major groups and have less opportunity to use research tools that are not taught within their particular major. When students seek to apply research tools or thought techniques from other fields to their own problem, they may discover a new perspective from which to approach their project. As our Honors program at Western encourages interdisciplinary thinking through our junior-level seminars, it is important to continue this exercise as students move on to their senior projects.

The instructor of the class should be knowledgeable about methods of interdisciplinary and interdepartmental research. Affiliation with or knowledge of library science and the library's Research-Writing Studio would also be helpful. It might also be helpful for instructor to be able to act as a facilitator of relationships with other professors at the university who would be interested in working with a student on their project. The instructor of the course would work with students individually and as a group to develop and deepen their ideas, as well as facilitate and encourage communication between students in the class about their projects. For example, the instructor might recommend that student B discuss a certain question concerning their project with student A, whom the instructor knows would be interested in or have more experience

within the discipline. If the resources are available and the course is mainly Canvas-based, it may be beneficial to have two instructors monitoring the Canvas course; one instructor would assist with students whose interests lay in the humanities, and another instructor to assist students who wish to research a topic in science and technology.

Below is a tentative outline for how HNRS 400 might be scheduled. The outline includes timelines for the three main deadlines as well as when in-person group meetings and weekly discussion might occur. The schedule allows for both peer and instructor mentoring, and seeks to strike a balance between independent and collaborative research. This schedule is modelled with Canvas as the primary platform in mind.

HNRS 400 Tentative Course Outline

Week 1: Introduction to course. Each student is required to write a post describing their current status with regard to the project and familiarize themselves with the layout of the course.

Week 2: Students begin field-specific research exercise. One post in groups designated by major required on Canvas.

Week 3: Students continue field-specific research exercise. One group meeting in major groups required and discussion of progress, questions, and difficulties should take place.

Week 4: Post on topic chosen through research exercise due on Canvas. Students must respond to one post with thoughts, questions, and feedback on another student's topic of choice.

Week 5: Students begin drafting proposal. One in-person meeting between interdisciplinary groups is required. This meeting should consist of introducing discussing the topics students have chosen for their proposals.

Week 6: Students will continue to work on their drafts. One discussion post is required within interdisciplinary groups, and post should be in response to a problem or scenario proposed by the instructor.

Week 7: First draft of proposal is due and should be posted in the "home-base" major discussion forum for peer feedback. Interdisciplinary groups meet in-person to discuss first drafts.

Week 8: Students continue to develop final drafts of their proposals

Week 9: Students continue to work on their final drafts. Another interdisciplinary discussion post response to instructor's proposed question topic is due.

Week 10: A final draft of the student's proposal is due and should be submitted.

REFERENCE OF OTHER UNIVERSITY "PRE-THESIS" COURSE MODELS

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY: <https://honors.usu.edu/capstone-graduation/requirements>

HONR 3900 is a one credit class that prepares students for their own capstone projects by having them study past projects, choose a research topic, and find a mentor. The course goal is to develop a working proposal for a capstone project.

CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY (WILLIAM O. DOUGLAS HONORS COLLEGE):

<http://www.cwu.edu/douglas-honors/courses-and-seminars>

DHC 401, or "Honors Capstone Seminar," requires students complete a capstone project proposal by the end of the course. This course is specifically humanities-focused.

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY: <https://honors.wsu.edu/thesis/#Thesistimeline> ;

HONORS 398, or "Thesis Proposal Course," is a one credit class recommended for the end of a student's sophomore year, or the beginning of their junior year. Emphasis is placed on choosing a research topic, writing a proposal and connecting with an advisor. The goal of the course is to have a proposal to submit by the end.

UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, RENO: <http://www.unr.edu/honors/current-students/curriculum>

HON 235, or "Research in the Information Age," is a one credit class scheduled in the fall. It must be taken before student signs up for thesis credits. This class is scheduled in two sections that meet weekly in 75 minute sessions.

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY: <http://honors.colostate.edu/senior-honors-thesis>

HONR 399 or "Honors Pre-Thesis" is typically taken in the fall of a student's junior year. It is a one credit class that prepares students for the work they will be doing for their theses, which are usually done one semester before graduation, or fall of their senior year.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN

COLORADO: <http://www.unco.edu/honors/uhp/curriculum.aspx> ;

http://www.unco.edu/honors/pdf/UHP_Handbook_2016-2017.pdf

HON 351 or Junior Honors Seminar/Project Design is a one credit class that is recommended to be taken fall quarter of their junior year. The course directs a student's focus on an area of

interest within their fields and brings them through the process of conducting “background research” on the topic and writing a proposal. Students work with their mentors during this time.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON: <http://depts.washington.edu/uwhonors/reqs/#college>
HONORS 496 is taken during a student’s senior year. It is a one credit seminar that requires the student to reflect on the work they’ve done in Honors and present a project at the end of the course.

UC DAVIS :http://honors.ucdavis.edu/honors_curriculum/Year%203.html

Two Research Prep courses (one for humanities, and one for sciences) are offered fall quarter. The courses help them prepare for their projects by conducting research within their area of interest. Emphasis is placed on the feasibility and particulars of proposal writing and finding a mentor.

OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY: <http://honors.oregonstate.edu/START>

A one-hour workshop is provided at the beginning of each quarter to introduce students to thesis planning and writing.