

PLANS FOR IMPROVING THE THESIS EXPERIENCE FOR HONORS STUDENTS AND FACULTY

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A growing realization that some things need fixing with our Honors thesis requirements led me to send all Honors faculty members a memo last April entitled “Some ideas for improving the thesis experience for Honors students and faculty.” This was the gist of it:

Often the thesis is a rewarding capstone experience for students and a gateway to research and other creative work beyond the undergraduate years. But as Honors enrollments have grown, challenges associated with providing large numbers of students with a meaningful experience have become acute. Two distinct but related issues must be resolved if we expect our Honors Programs and the Honors College to flourish:

- *Recognition and support of faculty members for thesis supervision*
- *Preparation and motivation of students to develop viable proposals and to complete and defend their theses in a timely fashion.*

Many of you responded to my plea for comments and suggestions with thoughtful e-mails and invitations to sit down and talk. In all, over ninety people (fully 25% of Honors faculty at the university) provided me with feedback about Honors theses, including the good and the not so good aspects. This reminds me, if I needed reminding, of the broad faculty support for our Honors programs.

This report will briefly summarize your observations and suggestions and outline a series of action steps. The Honors College can enact some of these on its own or in partnership with other campus organizations, while others will require action by the Honors programs in the various colleges. Some can be launched almost immediately, while others involving student deadlines will need to be phased in over a reasonable period of time.

Faculty recognition and support

Several of the faculty issues are straightforward and easily resolvable. Only 10% of the faculty respondents opposed or had serious reservations about an Honors College program to provide up to \$1,000 to faculty members in support of undergraduate research for each thesis supervised. We are already doing this for a significant fraction of theses supervised as part of the Walton-funded research grants for Honors students. ***Beginning this fall we will extend these \$1,000 grants in support of undergraduate research to the mentors of all Honors thesis students, with a limit of four theses per professor per year.***

These awards will be made in the spring after the SURF and Honors College Research Grants have been announced. Faculty members whose students receive SURF and Honors College Research Grants will not receive an additional \$1,000 for the same projects though if the amount awarded by SURF is less than \$1,000 that amount will be supplemented. Faculty members who are mentoring a thesis student during a given year but who have not yet received a grant associated with that project will receive an e-mail in the spring inviting them to fill out a brief online form requesting the support. After the form is completed, an account will be created for their use for purposes fitting within the broad objective of undergraduate research support.

Some additional faculty suggestions in this area are beyond our means (released time for thesis supervision, for example), but others would cost nothing. Simple recognition in annual evaluations and promotion and tenure processes would only involve adding Honors thesis supervision to the set of academic activities which professors may list on annual reports or curriculum vitae. Ultimately the departments and colleges will have to enact this, but ***I will strongly encourage each of the deans and chairs to recognize faculty supervision of Honors thesis by systematically incorporating them into faculty documents prepared for annual evaluations and promotion and tenure decisions.***

Student preparation and motivation

Interestingly enough, most of the professors who responded commented at greater length on student issues than on faculty matters. These comments were wide ranging, and while there were no unanimous recommendations (this is a faculty conversation, right?) some clear patterns emerged. Here they are, along with action steps to be taken as soon as possible:

1. *Timetable for beginning the thesis.* Virtually all who commented on this issue agreed that the current requirement for submitting the formal proposal in the fall of the senior year (more accurately, the semester before expected graduation) makes it difficult to complete a high quality thesis one semester later. While some endorsed my suggestion of pushing the proposal deadline to late spring semester of the junior year (or two semesters before expected graduation), others argued that even this was not enough time. Several units in the sciences currently have students begin their thesis research in the laboratory at the beginning of the junior year or earlier. The Fulbright College Honors Council has voted to require that prospective Honors graduates, beginning with those expecting to graduate in Spring 2009, submit their proposals two semesters before graduation. For that first group, the deadline will be prior to spring break in 2008.

Three problems surfaced with regard to a proposal deadline prior to the senior year. (1) In Engineering, the Honors thesis will often be associated with the required senior design project, and at present the senior design teams and projects are not set until the fall of the senior year. (2) The current deadline for spring graduates dovetails with state-wide deadlines for submitting applications for SURF funding. (3) Many Honors students study abroad or are otherwise engaged off campus during part or all of their junior year. Based on conversations with a number of people who are knowledgeable about these potential problems I am confident that with sufficient lead time they can all be resolved.

I am asking Associate Dean Suzanne McCray to work with the Honors Directors in the five colleges and the School of Architecture to develop a common timetable and set of instructions for submission of the thesis proposal in the second semester prior to graduation (i.e., late spring of the year prior to an anticipated May graduation). The various Honors programs may also wish to establish their own set of dates to serve as milestones on the way to completion of the thesis.

2. *Understanding expectations: what does a good thesis in my field look like?* Almost as many people expressed concern about this issue as advocated getting students started earlier, with several stating that many students begin work on the thesis with no idea that it is more than a high school term paper. Consequently, some students budget their time during the senior year based on false assumptions, treating the thesis as just one more three-hour course or something they can complete while managing a full load of coursework and other extracurricular activities. Several professors pointed specifically to a lack of understanding of discipline-specific norms for a thesis or other creative project.

Several departments have already instituted measures to insure that students understand early in the game what they will be expected to do. For example, some departments host presentations and poster sessions in which seniors present their work to younger students. Some require Honors students to meet with faculty members in the sophomore or even freshman year to gain insights on what research in the field is about. Some have required scope and methods Honors courses for juniors which are tied to development of strong thesis proposal. At the risk of omitting several other units which are doing a good job in this area let me mention the Departments of Chemistry & Biochemistry and History and the College of Agricultural, Food, and Life Sciences as units which have exemplary programs for preparing students.

The Honors College will (a) serve as a clearinghouse for best practices for understanding norms for theses in the disciplines from Honors programs in the departments and colleges, (b) create a campus-wide celebration of undergraduate research, with poster sessions and talks, to complement but not compete with existing programs, (c) promote understanding of departmental expectations for Honors these by means of the Thesis Support Program outlined below.

3. *Foundational skills for research and presentation of results.* The third most frequently mentioned concern was lack of student preparation in library and information gathering skills (most often defined as poor preparation for conducting a literature search) and the organizational and writing skills which begin with defining a topic and end with the completed thesis in the student's field of study. Faculty members from the Departments of Physics and Biological Sciences and the School of Architecture, among others, report strong ties with professional librarians with responsibilities in their academic domains. However, Library leaders report that coverage is uneven, and more support is would be helpful with students as they actually begin work on the thesis. From what I can gather there is at present no parallel activity from outside the academic units on writing and presentation skills.

The Honors College will (a) partner with the Quality Writing Center (QWC) to establish the QWC/Honors College Thesis Support Program (see description below), first as a pilot project in 2007-2008 involving the Departments of Psychology and Biological Sciences and the Walton College of Business, with the intent of expanding it to all interested units thereafter, and (b) partner with the University of Arkansas Libraries to extend the Library's systematic work with departments in equipping Honors thesis students with bibliographic and information systems skills. This library support program will be integrated into the Thesis Support program in cases where the academic unit involved thinks it appropriate, and by other means with other interested departments or clusters of departments.

4. *Methodological preparation in the disciplines or in broad academic domains.* In my April memo I floated the idea that the Honors College could support the development of a few "brief seminars on methodology and techniques appropriate for the thesis in several broad fields." Response to this suggestion was mainly negative, and rightly so. A few folks said they wished they had a scope and methods course in their department and asked if the Honors College could fund such courses for the departments. Sorry, but we just don't have the resources to do that. We are putting over \$200,000 into Honors sections of core courses in Fulbright College, and we are tapped out.

Methodological preparation and assessment of whether individual students are prepared to undertake thesis work will remain in the hands of the individual units, however they may choose to do handle that.

APPENDIX

Quality Writing Center/Honors College Thesis Writing Support Program

Program Description

The Honors College is partnering with the University's Quality Writing Center to provide discipline-specific support for Honors students in the writing of theses and thesis proposals. A pilot version of the program in 2007-2008 will involve three academic units, the Department of Biological Sciences, the Department of Psychology, and the Walton College of Business. Assuming that the pilot is successful, the program will be expanded to include all departments which wish to participate. The program will consist of three phases:

1. An experienced thesis writing consultant from QWC will work with faculty members in each of the units to collect discipline-specific proposal and thesis guidelines and samples of exemplary theses. Faculty members will assist the consultant in determining how the QWC services can best augment existing support provided to the students.
2. The consultant will communicate guidelines to students via small group workshops, teach pre-writing strategies, discuss approaches to the writing process, and organize peer writing groups. The consultant will also assemble information on discipline-specific writing conventions and communicate that to the student writing mentors who will be assigned to each unit. (Student mentors will have prior experience as tutors in the QWC)
3. Student mentors will provide one-on-one assistance with individual thesis writers, helping them to negotiate deadlines for each phase of the thesis and giving them instruction in writing and editing. Thesis writers will assist each other through peer groups.