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Contracts for Honors Credit: Balancing Access, Equity, and Opportunities for Authentic Learning

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Abstract: Research indicates that a majority of honors students across the country are able to earn honors credit through the fulfillment of honors contracts. These learning contracts grant honors credit to students who perform additional work in non-honors-designated sections of other courses. Despite their popularity, little has been written on the design and delivery of honors contracts. An inaugural annual honors contract system is presented, involving student reflections on contract fulfillment and programmatic assessment of learning outcomes. Students ($n = 38$) demonstrate an understanding of interdisciplinarity, alternative ways of knowing and being, and intellectual humility while faculty ($n = 28$) indicate a high level of satisfaction with contracts' design and output. Strengths and weaknesses are discussed. The author concludes that despite legitimate concerns about the effects of contracts on honors curricula and community, these agreements provide flexible ways for offering rich learning opportunities to students. A historical overview of honors contracts is provided.

Keywords: honors contracts; learning contracts; interdisciplinarity; metacognition

MAKING THE CASE FOR HONORS CONTRACTS

Honors programs and colleges, defined as often by a sense of community as by a coherent curriculum, are a common feature of higher education throughout the United States. At many institutions, a sense of community is fostered in the honors students' coursework, which generally features classes open only to honors students and includes honors-designated seminars,

colloquia, study abroad programming, and sections of required courses located in both the majors and the general education curriculum. This section-based model for an honors curriculum is the predominant one in most colleges and universities, including four-year institutions. In "Demography of Honors: The Census of U.S. Honors Programs and Colleges" (2017), Scott, Smith, and Cognard-Black note that 90.8% of the 458 honors programs and colleges surveyed have "separate courses in honors" (208, Table 7).

However, the same study shows that at a majority of institutions with honors programs (63.6% of 458), students are able to earn honors credit, additionally or exclusively, through fulfillment of honors contracts that stipulate additional work the student must perform in a non-honors-designated section of a course. The popularity of contracts has remained quite stable over the past decade: Sederberg's 2005 survey of honors colleges found that 68.6% of the 38 colleges responding reported offering contracts. The contract option is popular at schools, such as two-year colleges (TYCs), where an insufficient number of honors students can guarantee sustainable offerings of honors courses. Other institutions supplement honors-designated course sections with honors contracts to give students more flexible means of completing honors requirements in a timely fashion.

Clearly, honors contracts do not, per se, foster the same sense of community bolstered by honors-designated course sections. In "Using Hybrid Courses to Enhance Honors Offerings in the Disciplines" (2016), Youmans writes, "the concern among honors faculty and honors committee members has always been that an honors track consisting of half or more of the total honors credits as independent contract work would undermine the integrative and communal nature of the honors experience" (20). Moreover, many faculty and administrators fear that contracts may lead to a dilution of the academic or intellectual rigor one would expect to find in an honors-designated course section. Guzy (2016) laments that the "default setting" for honors contracts is "more assignments," arguing that "calling coursework 'honors' by simply offering more of the same—more papers, more tests, more books, more labs—is indeed a waste of time and tuition" for students coming to college with credit from AP courses or dual enrollment programs (8), and Badenhausen (2012) claims that

> we are all better served by a recruiting process that emphasizes the distinctiveness of the *learning experience* in honors and that we should spend most of our time educating families about the way honors classes are different rather than better. Of course, this strategy only

> works if honors faculty have thought intentionally about the unique features of honors pedagogy and if programs do not rely heavily on honors contracts or h-options. (17–18)

Other authors are more neutral or forgiving, often implying that they are a necessary evil when an honors program or college is unable to deliver its curriculum otherwise owing to resource shortfalls or other extenuating circumstances. In their study of honors programs and colleges at historically black colleges and universities (2011), Davis and Montgomery note that "[b]ecause of budgetary constraints and insufficient honors courses, many administrators indicated that they relied on honors contracts to fulfill program requirements" (81), suggesting that in the absence of such constraints, contracts would deemed less desirable. Sederberg (2007) suggests that increasing reliance on contracts signals a "degradation of the honors curricular offerings" (23) brought about by the demands of delivering an honor curriculum to an increasingly large body of students. Others tout contracts as an option, though not necessarily an ideal one, for honors credit in specific settings, including very small institutions (Birgen 2015), STEM disciplines (Cordero, Jorgensen, & Shipman 2012), adult education programs (Ghosh, Dougherty, & Porada 2006), online programs (Johnson 2013), and United States universities overseas (Yyelland 2012).

Yet others find true positive value in contracts, if they are properly implemented and overseen. For example, Pattillo (2015) describes how honors contracts support first-generation college students' research and help them prepare for both graduate school and professional careers; DiLauro, Meyers, and Guertin (2010) argue for greater flexibility in contract design, offering a specific example of a highly successful "extended" honors contract; and Austin (1991) hints at the metacognitive value of honors contracts: "The experience of constructing a rationale for one's education and of selecting courses and other experiences to meet those academic objectives is, in itself, an important educational experience" (14). Perhaps no account of honors contracts' success is more passionate than Stratemeier's (2002), in which the author, herself an instructor in a TYC honors program, recounts her experience signing on to an honors contract in a course she took at her own institution. From her experience, she concludes that

> [o]ptimally, the honors contract experience will enable the student to become more knowledgeable about one or multiple aspects of the subjects; to think independently, critically, and creatively; to develop good time-management and organization skills; to learn how to work

> independently; and to realize that one is responsible for one's own education. (51)

Cunha (2003), Guzy (2003), Holkeboer (2003), and Campbell (2005) all describe other positive attributes and outcomes of honors contracts.

Overall, however, little has been written on honors contracts beyond brief and oblique mention, in part because effective assessment of contracts is inherently difficult (see, for example, Lanier 2008, pp. 99–100). A thorough review of all NCHC publications yielded fewer than a hundred articles and monographs including the word "contract" even once, and only in about half of these pieces does the word refer to honors contracts specifically. Only three articles (Stratemeier 2002, Bolch 2005, and DiLauro, Meyers, & Guertin 2010) are dedicated solely to honors contracts although Otero and Spurrier's *Assessing and Evaluating Honors Programs and Honors Colleges: A Practical Handbook* (2005) offers guidelines on designing and delivering contracts effectively and James's *A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges* (2006) contains both a short section on contracts and an appendix offering several TYCs' contracts as samples. Notably, Miller's forthcoming monograph *Honors Contracts: Insights and Oversights* (soon to appear in the NCHC Monograph Series) will offer a substantial contribution to the literature.

My purpose in the present article is to offer an account of the design and implementation of an honors contract system recently introduced in my university's liberal arts honors program, which has now existed for over thirty years. Our experience with honors contracts may serve to inform other institutions' faculty and administrators, particularly those in honors programs and colleges that are considering but have yet to implement honors contracts of their own.

While I begin with a brief discussion of the system's underlying philosophy and structure, my main focus will be on the outcomes of the system's first year, which included a single-semester pilot with only a few students and a further semester with broader participation. I will focus most closely on the students' end-of-semester metacognitive reflections, in which they were asked to unpack their experience in fulfilling an honors contract in a non-honors course section. Though the data are still insufficient to draw definitive conclusions, the students' own accounts suggest that, by and large, they have made great progress in achieving a number of critical learning goals, including

- understanding and appreciating interdisciplinarity;
- understanding and appreciating multicultural perspectives, alternative epistemologies, and different ways of being in the world;

- forging connections with alumni, community leaders, and scholars elsewhere;
- becoming aware of the complexities of the research process (including its affective dimensions); and
- valuing and practicing intellectual humility.

While no one student made mention of all these outcomes, nearly every student noted at least one of them, and several offered profound insights on multiple ones. The students' thoughts make clear to me that despite some concerns about the watering down of the academic integrity of the honors program, contracts provided an extra measure of curricular flexibility while providing opportunities for students' self-guided intellectual growth.

INTRODUCING HONORS CONTRACTS: DESIGN AND DELIVERY

In the fall 2018 semester, the honors program of the University of North Carolina, Asheville, piloted its new formalized honors contract system, recently passed in a unanimous vote by the university's academic policies committee. That semester, eight students, following guidelines workshopped by a group of roughly a dozen faculty, crafted proposals to receive honors credit for work done in non-honors course sections. The honors director and faculty serving on the honors program's advisory committee assessed the contract proposals; the honors director and individual course instructors assessed fulfillment of the resulting contracts. The following semester, thirty more students, working with sixteen different instructors, took advantage of the same opportunity, with twenty-five of the thirty successfully completing the work they had contracted to do and only one student trying but failing to complete the required work. The four remaining students decided mid-semester to void their contracts and not pursue honors credit.

Several students had contracted for honors credit on an ad hoc basis over the previous couple of years, typically as a stopgap means of earning the handful of credits still needed to graduate with distinction in honors. However, there was no guarantee of consistency in their work, and communications between the student, their instructor, the honors director, and the registrar's office suffered from similar inconsistency. All in all, the scattered nature of these first contracts made them messy and unsustainable, requiring a greater quantity of work on everyone's part with little assurance of the quality of the

students' work. Thus, there were significant advantages to the introduction of a formal system of honors contracts:

- *Ease of staffing and curricular sustainability.* Honors sections of both first-year writing and the university's core of humanities courses have always had lower enrollment caps than their non-honors counterparts: typically, 15–16 for the former versus 19–25 for the latter. Staffing the honors courses has thus been more difficult and has increased the workload of the coordinator of first-year writing, the director of the humanities program, and the director of the honors program. Introducing honors contracts has made the curriculum more sustainable, permitting the elimination of honors sections of first-year writing, which were generally under-enrolled.
- *Greater equity and accessibility in the honors program.* Historically, students in some majors requiring above-average numbers of credit hours (e.g., art, management and accountancy, and mechatronics engineering) have been underrepresented in our honors program owing to the greater amount of time these students must commit to fulfilling their major requirements. The opportunity to earn honors credit more flexibly makes the honors program a more realistic option for students in these majors, improving the disciplinary diversity of the program through greater retention of these students. Moreover, an increasing number of honors transfer students in any discipline, who often face similar demands on their time as they focus on completing major coursework, also benefit from the curricular flexibility the contract system provides.
- *Recruitment of new honors students.* The option to propose a contract for honors credit is open to all students, not just those in our honors program: non-honors students who successfully fulfill the requirements of a contract may receive honors credit retroactively should they later join the program. Thus, contracts serve as a means of recruiting new students into the program, broadening its impact on the student body as a whole.
- *Deeper student engagement in disciplinary courses.* The work students do in fulfilling honors contracts in disciplinary courses necessarily requires them to engage course content and concepts more deeply than they would otherwise and to reflect metacognitively on this work at the semester's end. Moreover, many of the activities expected of

students to earn honors credit, e.g., leading class discussion or designing interactive class activities, deepen their peers' engagement as well.

- *Improved ability diversity in the classroom.* While careful and controlled comparisons of higher-ability sections and mixed-ability sections of courses at the university level are hard to come by, the scholarship on teaching and learning in K–12 classrooms suggests that placing students in well-run, mixed-ability classes typically benefits lower-ability students without detriment to higher-ability students. Therefore, we should expect that the presence of honors students in non-honors classes should benefit non-honors students without negatively affecting the learning of their peers in honors. For a thorough discussion of the positive impact of honors students and the honors curriculum more broadly on all students' learning, see Clauss (2011).
- *Improved overall diversity in the classroom.* While the body of students involved in our university's honors program is increasingly diverse in race, ethnicity, family income level, and various other demographic measures, this group is still predominantly white, middle- and upper-class, and female. Greater classroom diversity across any dimension leads to greater perspectival diversity and thus to richer classroom conversations and more engaged coursework.

Meanwhile, in designing the contract system, we took care to mitigate potential negative impacts, including the following:

- *Dilution of academic or intellectual rigor.* One of the instructors' primary concerns regarding honors contracts is a potential loss of academic depth concomitant with removal of a talented student from the pool of similarly talented peers. Concerned faculty, including many of my peers, fear that honors contracts will simply mean more assignments and not necessarily more meaningful ones (see Guzy's (2016) comment above about the "default" setting for honors contract work). To counteract this possibility, our proposal guidelines urge students toward student-centered, experiential work that "must not simply be 'more'; rather, it must be meaningfully integrated with the course content and learning goals and the work the course already requires" (see Appendix A for the full text of the guidelines). We offer examples of such work, including original research, community engagement, and student leadership opportunities in and outside of class.

- *Weakening of the honors community.* Another valid concern is the loss of a sense of community that could come from increasing the percentage of honors credits earned through contracts and not through participation in honors-designated course sections. To promote curricular flexibility through contracts without sacrificing community cohesion, our system, like others, limits the number of credits students may earn through contracts (see Appendices A and B as well as Otero & Spurrier 2005 and James 2006). Though data are as yet scant, we have seen no enrollment decline in honors-designated courses since implementing our formal honors contract system.
- *Increased faculty workload.* Although the effect of the contract system on faculty workload is not yet clear, managing the crafting and completion of honors contracts will, perforce, lead to extra work for some instructors. However, we took a number of steps to limit additional work:
  - The student proposing an honors contract, not the instructor for the course, is expected to do the bulk of the work crafting the contract. The instructor is expected to advise the student as needed, but the work of both crafting the contract and seeing that its expectations are met falls upon the student. The honors contract system is, by design, student-centered, with oversight by the honors director and the honors program's advisory committee serving to ensure the quality of students' proposed work.
  - Once a contract proposal is submitted by a student, the honors director and the advisory committee, not the instructor for the course, do the work of reviewing proposals and approving an honors designation for completed work. Moreover, each of the four members of the advisory committee reads only roughly a quarter of the proposals submitted in a given term. In practice so far, each faculty member besides the director has read roughly seven or eight proposals.
  - Permitting honors contracts in a given section is the prerogative of the instructor. No faculty member is compelled to permit students to propose honors contracts in any given section of any given course. Furthermore, an instructor may permit at most five honors contracts in any single course section.

- *Increased workload for the honors director.* Though the honors director must now manage the implementation of the contract program, the majority of this work occurs in the first two or three weeks of the semester, and the planned adoption of procedures for performing this work—e.g., developing digital platforms for submission, review, approval, and archiving of proposed contracts—will make the work more manageable still.
- *Increased workload for the registrar's office.* Though the associate registrar is ultimately responsible for granting a student honors credit for a given course, the honors director has made this step as simple as possible by simultaneously submitting all requests for granting honors credit so that the registrar's office does only a few minutes' worth of new work.

So far, so good. As noted above, over three dozen formal contract proposals have yielded nearly as many contracts fulfilled, and the faculty supervising these fulfillments report considerable satisfaction with their students' work. Moreover, oversight of the contract system has proven efficient and sustainable. As honors director, I see to most of the system's management, and individual instructors succeed in resting the bulk of the contracts' burden on their students' shoulders. Most instructors meet several times with each student throughout the semester, but these meetings are brief ones at which students do most of the talking. Instructors manage to find other efficiencies, too, such as recycling contract projects from one semester to the next and grouping multiple students on a single collaborative project in which each plays a distinct and critical role.

While these advantages alone make the case for continuing and even expanding the contract system, more striking still are the gains in student learning evident in the metacognitive reflections students submitted at the end of each term.

LOOKING BACK: STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON THEIR LEARNING THROUGH HONORS CONTRACTS

The work that students contract to do is diverse. Some projects result in concrete artifacts like papers, posters, newsletters, or wikis. Other contract projects are more ephemeral: students may lead class discussions or field

trips, engage with community partners, or offer presentations or performances that leave little to no physical trace of their direct efforts. Regardless of the outcome of the projects, however, all students undertaking an honors contract are required to craft a brief metacognitive reflection on the work they performed in fulfilling their contract, a document in which they look back on the work and examine the ways it helped them learn and grow. As the one constant feature across all honors contracts, these reflections offer the best means of assessing the contracts' success at helping students meet a variety of learning outcomes.

The language guiding students in crafting their reflection is intentionally spare and brief (see Appendix A), allowing students considerable latitude as they write on the work they have done. Though individual instructors are asked to provide additional guidance according to the nature of their respective courses, students are not prompted with any language regarding specific learning goals. Nothing is said about interdisciplinarity, intercultural competency, intellectual humility, or any of the other topics the students raised, unbidden, in their reflections. The richness of their writing suggests that many students made the most of the opportunity to earn honors credit via contract. Here, I summarize some of the most striking themes in the students' reflections.

Understanding and Appreciating Interdisciplinarity

Given its centrality to many honors programs, it is heartening that several students' reflections made mention of interdisciplinary scholarship and its benefits. Students credited interdisciplinary investigation with both intellectual and personal growth as they learned to see the world through multiple lenses. Miranda's reflection, written on the in-depth study of Incan architecture she performed for her humanities course, was typical in its recognition of the inherent value of interdisciplinary perspectives: "This research project enabled me to . . . make clear interdisciplinary connections between architecture, masonry techniques, political structures, community, religion and landscape; furthermore, I was able to share this knowledge with my peers and enhance their course experience." She went further, connecting her project to her engineering major and career plans: "The aspect of this research project that I found most invigorating was the interdisciplinary connections between my analysis and my coursework in engineering."

Abril Carolina's case is another typical one. For her course on mammalian physiology, Abril Carolina studied the connections between the physiological

effects of opioids and these drugs' role in the current public health crisis; she wrote, "This project has allowed me to grow not only in my class, but also as a person, through making connections, listening to different perspectives, seeing how they come together, having a more open mind, and as [our university] says 'seeing the art in science and the science in art.'"

Understanding and Appreciating Multicultural Perspectives, Alternative Epistemologies, and Different Ways of Being in the World

Several students sought alternative viewpoints not only from different disciplines but from entirely different communities and cultures. Through cross-cultural comparisons of everything from divination to developing social programs dedicated to food security, students learned about others', and their own, ways of life. For instance, Miranda, credited her project with enabling her to "[learn] far more on the Incan empire than the regular assigned readings and discussions allowed for." Similarly, Mark's account of his research on divination methods from across the globe spoke of a deep understanding not just of ritual practices but of the philosophies underpinning them:

> When I first began this research, I was initially looking for things that I previously always ascribed as being required for something to count as a practice of divination. For example, I found myself looking for a particular tool or ritual ceremony, in which the individual or individuals in the role of the seer or oracle would undergo some activity in order to receive a message from a divine being. While this surprised me at the time, I now see why I came up empty-handed for such a long period of time, and for such a consistent period of time. It never occurred to me to think from the perspective of the culture itself; how their own beliefs and views on communicating with the divine might be extremely different from the practices that are widely recognized and accepted today.

No doubt these realizations about perspectival diversity will inform Mark's academic thinking for a long time to come.

Meanwhile, Carson's project never took him past our city limits, but its effect on his intercultural understanding was equally profound. Like Miranda, Carson was already considering applications of his broadened worldview to his future career; about his outreach to local Latinx leaders, he wrote, "[I]t was evident that reaching out to different communities required a certain level of

cultural understanding. . . . The constant effort to be culturally mindful while going through the planning process of this festival was something I think a lot of businesses can learn from."

Self-discovery featured prominently in several of the students' reflections. About his study of the racial dimensions of mass incarceration in the United States, Matthew E. wrote:

> This project was something I took on with the intent of educating others about my perspective on the issue of race and how it affected my sense of personal identity growing up. Instead, I learned quite a lot about myself—about the history and psychology of race, about culture, about the perspectives of others, and, perhaps most importantly, about how these things have influenced who I am today.

Forging Connections with Alumni, Community Leaders, and Scholars Elsewhere

While some students gained access to alternative perspectives through readings and other forms of library research, other students came by such perspectives more directly in personal interaction with other individuals and communities. Some of the most successful contract projects were collaborative, with students gaining practice in navigating relationships with other students, scholars, and stakeholders from a variety of communities, including future communities that the student could only imagine at present.

Abril Carolina's study of opioids put her in contact with a variety of healthcare experts, including a family practice physician, a family nurse practitioner, our university's substance abuse counselor, and two student volunteers at a local harm-reduction clinic. In her words, her conversations with these people helped her "gain a valuable 'behind the scenes' viewpoint of the epidemic." Carson's work with local Latinx communities taught him optimal communication strategies: "I have recently been following up with volunteers to confirm their participation in Dig Day for cooking demos. Not only do they not have emails, but they also will not respond to texts too long. As I have encountered this problem, every time the best solution is face-to-face contact with them."

One student's project led to a particularly surprising and satisfying collaboration. Meredith's honors contract for Humanities 214 had her investigating the cultural impact of various climatological phenomena, e.g., the "Medieval Climate Anomaly" and the "Little Ice Age," on Viking culture. Her research on this topic relied in part on cutting-edge climate data she obtained

from one of our school's alums: "I was able to talk to Stacy Porter, a [university] alumna, who is involved with research about the ice cores in Peru. She told me that the Peruvian ice cores show drier conditions but no anomalous temperatures during the [Medieval Climate Anomaly]."

Meredith was not the only one to connect with our university's scholars of a different era. Looking to the future instead of the past, Riley imagined an audience of future students who might engage with her work, which was a multimedia magazine on the topic of writing about writing: "We wanted to show the students how all of the material that we learned in the course was connected and that by using all of the concepts, they could make their writing more effective. . . . The magazine is a great resource for students who will be writing essays in the future."

Becoming Aware of the Complexities of the Research Process (Including Its Affective Dimensions)

Those students whose projects involved a substantial investigative component often learned as much about research as a process as they did about the topic ostensibly under study. Such newfound knowledge will assist these students in any future research efforts by enabling them to better navigate the process and avoid potential pitfalls or unfounded assumptions.

Albert was one of several students who found research more logistically challenging than he had anticipated:

> Not only was research new to me, but so was the process! . . . Inexperienced, I was highly ambitious about the scope of my project without fully understanding the complexity of the process. To me, the literature review was equal parts searching with focused questions and following up on clues like a map. However, I underestimated the importance of efficiency in a long-term project like this.

Roxie, too, felt overwhelmed at times by the research process, but she found solace and strength in collaborating with a friend in her study of Chinese art: "Having someone else work alongside me motivated me to work harder to achieve my goal. Therefore, instead of dreading my presentations and the fact that I had to stand and talk to the class for an hour, I was excited to share this new information with my classmates."

One particularly challenging aspect of the research process is effective use of primary sources. Unsure of how to cite them, synthesize them, or even find them in the first place, students often shy away from primary sources in

favor of pre-distilled information obtained from secondary sources. A few of the students completing honors contracts in the spring of 2019 made specific mention of their engagement with primary-source material. Meredith's discussion on this matter is a particularly thoughtful one, in which she acknowledges the difficulty of working with primary sources while simultaneously granting them interdisciplinary value:

> The big lesson I learned from this project is how hard it is to piece together the stories of people from this era and before with no guidance other than the natural records and assumptions taken from related research. . . . [T]he lack of primary sources during this period stands out to me. Humanities 214 encompasses the so-called "Dark Ages" in Europe, when much of our knowledge is pieced together through only a few writings mostly from the upper class. . . . Doing this research helped me understand the struggles with the reading of primary documents that historians go through when trying to read into the past, but it also helped me realize how important interdisciplinary studies are in this effort.

The novelty of research as a process evoked a variety of emotions, both negative and positive. Perhaps more used to the strongly scaffolded work typical of research projects in entry-level classes, some students expressed feelings of frustration, questioning their own self-image as scholars. Matthew M., for instance, noted, "I realized that the joy and feelings of discovery I normally have when digging through information can be replaced by exhaustion and disappointment when it is not easy to find information." Albert's underestimation of the complexity of his research was similarly frustrating: "[M]y findings from the literature review on medicinal plants in ancient Greece and Egypt initially boosted my confidence in its outcome, but additional searches became frustrating."

Not every emotional reaction was negative, however. Roxie drew satisfaction from her project's connection to personal interests:

> One of our readings was titled "The Song of the Lute," which was written by Bai Yuji. I investigated this poet's life in order to understand the meaning behind the poem and how he could personally connect to it. I enjoyed this presentation more because I was more invested in it due to my love and understanding of the arts.

For Holt, too, contract work had a positive emotional effect. To her, the honors contract was a way to find greater meaning in course material that she

found "dry" otherwise. Writing about her study of early-modern feminist figures, she noted that "this research was fulfilling because it deepened my understanding of the topic in question and I found myself more engaged with and interested in the material we were discussing."

Regardless of the emotion expressed, students' explicit recognition of the affective dimension of scholarship is a salutary one, better preparing each to engage in future research efforts with full anticipation of the complexities involved.

Valuing and Practicing Intellectual Humility

There are many ways of expressing the value of intellectual humility, reaching as far back as the apocryphal and often-paraphrased Socratic line, "I know that I know nothing." In their influential work on critical thinking, Paul and Elder (2010) define intellectual humility as "having a consciousness of the limits of one's knowledge, including a sensitivity to circumstances in which one's native egocentrism is likely to function self-deceptively; sensitivity to bias, prejudice and limitations of one's viewpoint." Such a trait is indispensable in a critical thinker, one who must attend as closely to what they do not know as to what they do, lest overweening intellectual conceit lead to biased or erroneous conclusions.

Unprompted, several students reflected on intellectual humility, most often obliquely, in offhand admissions of their own ignorance or acknowledgments of their growth as scholars. For instance, Holt, in her work on early-modern feminism, encountered viewpoints that were alien to her and reported on the subsequent shift in her thinking: the discovery of a research article offering an unfamiliar point of view "completely changed my understanding of the historical figure and showed me how significant anachronisms can be." Similarly, Riley's work in writing about writing spurred her growth as a writer: "[C]ompleting this magazine, helped me to reflect on all of the different components of writing and helped me to see how I have grown as a writer. . . . It helped me realize that I now have more 'tools' in my 'tool box' when it comes to writing, so I can make my writing more effective."

Albert's reflection makes explicit mention of intellectual humility:

> Part of the research process requires humility, particularly when acknowledging issues in the project. Despite being unsuccessful in finding relevant information for the project, I felt too invested in it to change course. Trying to force a relationship between the texts I analyzed became exhausting, tedious, and passionless. After becoming

> aware of these aspects, I realized that my approach needed to be more adaptive. After spring break, I admitted my shortcomings with the project to [the course's instructor] despite my numerous attempts to make it work. We discussed changing the scope and presentation format to not only be feasible but also enjoyable.

In their reflections on their projects, these students demonstrated something more than knowledge or intelligence; they demonstrated a trait that is harder still to attain and just as hard to cultivate, namely wisdom.

LOOKING FORWARD: THE FUTURE OF HONORS CONTRACTS AT UNC ASHEVILLE

Despite potential pitfalls, honors contracts are functioning well at our institution so far. A survey of faculty overseeing contracts suggests overall contentment with the system, with all respondents ($n = 8$) responding either "Satisfied" or "Very Satisfied" in response to the question "How satisfied were you with the contract system overall?" Of course, the smallness of this sample and the newness of the contract system make it too early to tell how it will fare in the future.

Nonetheless, the outlook is positive. Our first-year writing program has embraced the system wholeheartedly: in the current semester, seven instructors, responsible for 14 out of 22 (63.6%) sections of first-year writing, are offering a contract option in their classes. Though some faculty in our humanities program still have reservations, the program's director supports the system and looks forward to future conversations on its implementation. Furthermore, an increasing number of students and faculty are approaching me about the possibility of permitting contracts in a broader array of courses in the majors.

A future need is long-term assessment of the contract system. This process will involve, at least in part, a comparison of contractees' reflections with similar reflections crafted by students in honors-designated sections of comparable courses. We will also continue to examine instructors' perceptions of the system, ensuring a balance between the system's sustainability and its robustness. Various quantitative metrics will complete the picture: contract fulfillment rates, grade distributions, and various programs' contributions to the contract system will help us better understand contracts' efficacy, efficiency, and equity in application.

Ultimately, honors contracts rest in a highly unstable equilibrium. Managed well, they offer significant learning opportunities to our students without undue burden placed on any one instructor or administrator, but how the system will fare as it grows, as more and more students aim to take advantage of these opportunities, is still uncertain. As one of my colleagues reported when asked about the experience this past spring, "I had a great experience with this student, but I am concerned about the workload for the faculty. I am afraid that we are asking our faculty to do too much." We need to ask who will oversee contracts, how they will be recognized and rewarded, and whether we can continue to maintain the delicate balance we have struck between access, equity, and academic excellence. These are questions I am delighted to keep trying to answer.

NOTE

I have obtained written permission from all students to excerpt their reflections and to use their names in this piece. I include their words with immense gratitude for the work they have done.

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APPENDIX A

Honors Contract Guidelines

What follows are the current guidelines provided to all students and faculty interested in participating in the contract system.

Guidelines for Crafting a Contract for Honors Credit in a Non-Honors Course Section

This document guides students and instructors in developing a contract for receipt of Honors credit in a UNC Asheville course that is not designated as an Honors course. Applicants for credit by contract must follow all of the instructions below carefully; incomplete or improperly crafted contracts will not be considered. All contracts will be reviewed by the course instructor, the Honors Program Director, and at least one faculty member of the Honors Program Advisory Committee, who will together decide upon approval.

Honors contract proposals must be submitted to the **course instructor** no later than the end of the first week of class and to the **Honors Program Director** no later than the end of the second week of class in order to be reviewed. Notice of approval will be given no later than the end of the third week of class.

- While the student is expected to consult with the instructor of the course in designing a contract, it is the responsibility of the student to craft the contract itself.
- The Honors Program Director and other reviewers will either (a) accept the proposal as is, (b) accept the proposal with amendments, or (c) reject the proposal outright.
- Credit for completing the course (with any letter grade) and Honors credit are independent of one another. That is, a student may earn full credit for completing course requirements without successfully fulfilling the Honors contract. However, the student must pass the course with a grade of B or better in order to earn Honors credit, even if all requirements of the contract are met.
- In order to ensure a reasonable workload for faculty, instructors may enter into **at most five (5)** Honors contracts per course section.

Questions about the instructions below or any other aspect of the Honors contract process can be directed to the Honors Program Director, Patrick Bahls <pbahls@unca.edu>.

To the student crafting this contract: *please submit honors contracts completed as indicated below to your course instructor, who will then forward it to the Honors Program Director.*

Student and Course Information. The student completing the Honors contract must provide the following information:

- Student's name
- Student's ID number
- Student's email
- Student's Honors membership: are you currently a member of the Honors Program?

  (**Note:** non-Honors students may elect to contract for Honors credit, to be granted retroactively should the student later join the Honors Program.)
- Student's class standing (e.g., first-year, sophomore, *etc.*)
- Course prefix and number
- Course name
- Term in which the course is offered (e.g., "Fall 2018")
- Instructor's name
- Instructor's email and campus phone number

Proposed Work. The student completing the contract must write a brief (200–400 words) narrative description of the work to be completed in order that they earn Honors credit.

> **Note.** The proposed work must supplement and complement the work already required for the course. The work must not simply be "more"; rather, it must be meaningfully integrated with the course content and learning goals and the work the course already requires. Ideally, the proposed work should involve active, student-guided, experiential learning.

As noted, the narrative should make clear how the contracted work meaningfully builds upon required work. Please see the final section of this document for examples of potential work.

Timeline and Structure. The student completing the contract must give a brief timeline of the work, indicating how it will be structured throughout the semester. This timeline should also indicate how the work will be responded to and assessed by the instructor, providing at least two midterm "milestones" at which the student and instructor will meet to discuss the student's progress toward completing contracted work.

End-of-Term Reflection. In order to receive Honors credit via contract, the student must complete an end-of-term reflection on the work they have performed for Honors credit. This reflection must provide more than a summary of the student's work; in particular, it must include a "metacognitive" component, in which the student explains how the contracted work helped them to gain a better understanding of the content the course treats. *The end-of-term reflection is due to the course instructor and the Honors Program Director* ***no later than the last day of class****.*

Granting of Honors credit. The student will be notified whether Honors credit is to be granted no later than the date on which final grades are due in a given semester. Please note that students may successfully complete no more than two Honors contracts. In particular, no more than 8 hours of contracted Honors credit can be applied toward the 21 hours required to graduate with Distinction as a University Scholar, and no more than 4 hours of contracted Honors credit can be applied toward the 12 hours required to graduate with Recognition as an Honors Scholar.

Examples of potential Honors contract projects. The examples of Honors contract projects given below are meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive. Honors credit may be granted for any sort of work deemed appropriate by the course's instructor and other reviewers of the contract, including any combination of the work suggested below.

- *Scholarship or creative work (as appropriate).* A student might be asked to perform research about some aspect of the course, above and beyond the expectations of other students. In some courses, it might be appropriate to ask students to complete some sort of creative project not expected of others. As noted above, these projects should not simply be "more"; they should reinforce the learning goals of the course and enrich the experience of the student doing this work.

- *Community engagement (as appropriate).* If the course is one with a natural connection to the community, it might be appropriate to ask the student to engage with the community in some way that helps the student to achieve the course's learning goals. Community-directed service and scholarship offer experiential opportunities that are frequently worthy of bestowing honors credit.
- *Other experiential learning.* Other experiential opportunities may present themselves, depending on the instructor's and student's plans for the semester: internships and other work experiences, travel (even if not organized as formal study abroad or study away); presentation at conferences, symposia, *etc.*, and similar practices can meaningfully enrich the student's learning.
- *Student leadership in and outside of class.* In order to earn honors credit, a student might be called upon to plan and lead (to a greater extent than expected of other students) in-class, extracurricular, or co-curricular activities related to the course and its content.

APPENDIX B

Honors Contract FAQs

What follows is the current text of the frequently asked questions sheet provided to all students and faculty interested in participating in the contract system.

Honors Contract FAQs

Some of the most common questions about the Honors contract process are given below, along with brief answers. If you have a question not included below, or if you require a fuller answer to any question that is included, please contact the Honors Program Director, Patrick Bahls, at <pbahls@unca.edu>.

- **Do I have to be in the Honors Program to sign onto an Honors contract?**

  No. If you are not currently in the Honors Program, you may sign onto an Honors contract. In this case, if you successfully complete an approved contract's requirements, you will receive Honors credit retroactively if you later join the Honors Program. (Please see the Honors website, <https://honors.unca.edu>, for more information about the criteria for Honors Program membership.)

- **Can I sign onto an Honors contract in any course?**

  You must get the permission of the course's instructor in order to sign onto a contract. Instructors are **NOT REQUIRED** to permit Honors contracts and the Honors Program permits them to enter into **at most five (5)** Honors contracts per course section.

- **Who is responsible for designing an Honors contract?**

  The student is expected to consult with the course's instructor in designing the work to be included in a contract. However, it is the responsibility of the student to write the contract itself.

- **What kind of work can be required in an Honors contract?**

  Honors contract work must supplement and complement the work already required for the course. The work must not simply be "more"; rather, it must be meaningfully integrated with the course content and learning goals and the work the course already requires. Ideally, this

work should encourage active, student-guided, experiential learning. See the Honors contract guidelines provided on the Honors website for examples of potential Honors contract projects.

- **The contract instructions ask me to identify "milestones" for my project, where I meet with my instructor. What do those meetings entail?**

  These "milestones" are meant as opportunities to meet with your instructor and ensure that you are making progress on your contracted work. You and your instructor should set clear expectations for those meetings ahead of time, and it is ***your*** responsibility (and ***not*** your instructor's!) to be sure that you come to those meetings prepared and having completed all work expected of you by that time.

- **Who decides whether a proposed contract is approved?**

  Once a contract is written, it will be reviewed by the course's instructor, the Honors Program Director, and at least one faculty member of the Honors Program Advisory Committee. These reviewers will decide on the approval of the contract by consensus. Completed contracts must be submitted no later than the end of the second week of classes in a given semester.

- **Who decides whether I've successfully completed the requirements of an Honors contract?**

  The course's instructor and the Honors Program Director will determine whether the student has successfully completed the contract's requirements.

- **Can I pass the class I've got an Honors contract for without getting Honors credit?**

  Yes. The student may complete the course with any grade (including an A) without receiving Honors credit, if the requirements of the contract are not met.

- **Can I get Honors credit without passing the class?**

  No. The student must complete the course with a grade of B or better in order to receive Honors credit, whether or not they have completed all requirements of the Honors contract.

- **I have a friend who wants to do an Honors contract in the same class as me. Can we design one contract for both of us?**

  Not exactly. Multiple students may contract to do collaborative work for Honors credit, but every student must sign onto their own individual contract. The course's instructor, if willing to consider Honors contracts, will then help the students to design a collaborative experience.

- **Is there a limit to the amount of Honors credit I can get by contract?**

  Yes. Students may successfully complete no more than two Honors contracts. At most 8 Honors credit hours may count toward the 21 hours required for graduation with Distinction as a University Scholar, and at most 4 Honors credit hours may count toward the 12 hours required for graduation with Recognition as an Honors Scholar.