

HONORS EDUCATORS: FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING

HONORS 2000 AND 3000

by

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative case study aims to examine the faculty perception of their instructional role in an Honors College 5-credit hour, year-long required course for hundreds of incoming Honors freshmen, where design thinking is utilized to assess and tackle wicked problems identified within communities. Few studies, if any, have been done on the faculty experience of teaching an Honors College specific course at the 4-year University level. Nine current and former faculty that taught HNRS 2000 and 3000 were interviewed in Fall 2021 regarding what their personal experience with the course looked like. Faculty reflected on their role within the interdisciplinary team, as researchers, as educators, and as curriculum designers. In addition, faculty were asked to reflect on topics pertaining to the students, such as psychological safety of class meetings, student engagement, challenges students faced, and college and life preparation. Challenges were discussed at length, from physical barriers, such as location and time, to more emotional and psychological barriers, like disrespectful students and cultural differences. Participants also shared why they chose to teach such courses and what would (or has) kept them coming back to teach them. Finally, the role of the Honors 2000 and 3000 itself was analyzed, with faculty speaking on its uniqueness in delivery style and curriculum changes.

*Keywords:* Honors curricula, faculty perceptions, education, pedagogy, interdisciplinary team teaching, challenges, students as a population, research, soft skills

## **Introduction**

Approximately 1,500 of the 2,500 nonprofit undergraduate institutions in the United States have some form of Honors curricula (Scott and Smith, 2016). Typically, Honors student enrollment incorporates just over 5% of the overall student body of a higher education institution (Scott et al., 2017). Most faculty members who deliver Honors course are teaching such curricula outside of their normal load as faculty members of other on-campus departments rather than solely teaching Honors courses (Scott et al., 2017). In looking at this curriculum, more than 80% of Honors programs have an interdisciplinary and research-intensive course that is offered to Honors students and some programs may require it as part of graduation requirements. Often, such courses (in conjunction with other Honors courses) average about 20% of the degree credits that students need in order to graduate from their institution (Scott et al., 2017).

Given that many students are receiving about one-fifth of their higher education from Honors faculty, it may be of considerable importance to understand what role faculty play in providing such curricula. Typically, studies done on Honors education seek to understand the impact of such education on the student. It may be of equal, if not greater, importance to understand the faculty experience of teaching Honors curricula.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Faculty Profile**

When reviewing the literature, a profile began to appear of what types of faculty teach Honors-level courses at colleges and universities. In a snowball quantitative study of 269 Honors faculty, 60% of participants had taught more than 15 years at the collegiate level, with 39% having spent 1 to 5 years teaching Honors courses. 29% reported being full professors and 28% reported being department heads (Dailey, 2016). In a separate quantitative study at the

community college level, Kisker and Outcalt found that instructors with a doctorate were three times more likely to teach Honors courses as compared to those who did not hold a terminal degree. They also found that Asian American and “other” (mixed-race) professors were far more likely to teach Honors courses, with 11% of Asian American respondents having taught such a course. In comparison, only 4.6% of White professors, 4% of African American professors, and 3.3% of Latino/a professors (2005). Honors professors were also more likely to report being currently or previously engaged in research or scholarship, with scholarship referring to applying for grants, subscribing to journals, publishing articles, and authoring books (Kisker & Outcalt, 2005).

### **Learning Communities**

Next, when looking at programs that function in a similar manner to the Honors program that would be studied, learning communities began to come into view. These programs involved greater student and faculty engagement, a multidisciplinary team of faculty co-teaching one class, and a focus on mentorship from the faculty. In a learning community, Jackson et al. found that faculty felt more personable in their Honors courses, stating that they felt they were able to develop more authentic relationships, have greater empathy, and just felt more connected to their students. Some felt they were able to establish greater community within their classrooms, rather than just teaching the material like they did in their standard classes (2013). A key piece of learning communities is a multidisciplinary team, similar to the one that will be looked at in this study. Professors in multidisciplinary teams have reported being able to collaborate more with colleagues from different disciplines, which they stated enhanced their professional development and also allowed them to become more engaged in their campus community as a whole (Jackson et al., 2013).

## **Faculty Experience Teaching Honors-Level Courses**

The most telling research studies looked specifically at the faculty experience of teaching Honors-level courses. Dailey found that 37% of 269 faculty surveyed volunteered to teach Honors courses, with 36% of them having been specifically requested to become involved in the Honors college (2016). Peters reported that the Honors college used to be a place for professors who were no longer wanted in their department, specifically back in the 1990s. However, after years of rebuilding, it has now become a place where top-notch faculty are requested and are even volunteering to serve (2009). In terms of why faculty chose to teach Honors courses, they reported interest in working with diverse student populations (Borst & Latz, 2020) and enjoying working with more high-achieving students (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995).

Once they began teaching Honors courses, the experience of faculty was mixed. Some faculty felt that they were able to experiment with new pedagogy and activities and reported implementing these new methods into their non-Honors courses (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995). Others reported encouraging greater engagement in areas like student-faculty interaction, utilization of diverse learning strategies, and collaborative learning (Miller et al., 2021). In addition to providing this greater engagement, Honors faculty were seen by the Dean of their Honors college as aiding in recruiting higher caliber students, bringing a new energy into curriculum development and teaching innovation, and providing a level of mentorship to Honors students (Peters, 2009). Part of this invigoration could be due to Honors faculty reporting that they're able to teach to their strengths, rather than typical curriculum, as well as being able to teach content they are passionate about (Borst, 2020). For a quantitative look at the faculty experience, 92% of faculty teaching Honors courses reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs, though all reported challenges (Dailey, 2016).

While many faculty report being satisfied, there are some that are dissatisfied enough to leave. Faculty reported leaving mainly due to the students. Challenges with students included frustration with student's cliques and arrogance, as well as their interest in grades over learning (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995). This seemed to be the one challenge that faculty were not able to overcome, showing how many of the faculty are in Honors education for the students. One challenge reported consistently by faculty still teaching Honors was not being able to juggle all the roles that Honors faculty may take on, such as club sponsors, committee heads, curriculum developers, and leaders of travel courses, all in addition to being "regular professors" and teaching Honors courses on top of their regular course load (Borst, 2020). Other professors echoed this concern and mentioned scheduling conflicts, saying that time was a bit of a challenge in and of itself. Some of these issues arose in trying to find one time that all the faculty on the multidisciplinary team were able to either teach a course or be available to meet together (Looft, 2019). One interesting challenge was lack of institutional support (Looft, 2019). This lack of institutional support likely arises from the fact that co-teaching and multidisciplinary teams are fairly new and institutions like colleges are sometimes slow to change.

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

A review of the literature showed that while studies have been done on the faculty experience of teaching Honors-level courses at the university level or Honors courses at a community college, as well as on the profiles of what types of faculty teach Honors-level courses, few, if any, studies have looked at the faculty experience of teaching an Honors College specific course at the 4-year University level. Considering the overall percentage that Honors curricula plays in an Honors student's educational career and, therefore, the impact faculty play

on Honors students, it is crucial to understand not only the effects of such curricula on students, but on the faculty providing the educational experience. This research project aims to:

1. Explore the faculty perception of their instructional role in an Honors College 5-credit hour, year-long required course for hundreds of incoming Honors freshmen through individual interviews.
2. Propose recommendations to better inform future iterations of such a course at the studied university and for future studies on Honors education.

### **Methods**

In order to address the research questions, a basic qualitative research design was utilized. Merriam (2009) states that a basic qualitative study looks at how “(1) people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). This research design is an appropriate way to examine faculty experiences of teaching HNRS 2000/3000 as it allows them to examine their experiences through reflection and interpretation. This research design could be qualified as a case study according to Merriam (2009), who states that an intrinsically bounded phenomenon qualifies as a case study. Given that there are a limited number of professors who have taught this course, this phenomenon is intrinsically bounded.

Data for this study was collected over the course of one academic semester (Fall 2021). Merriam (2009) says that the most common forms of data for a basic qualitative study are interviews, observations, or document analysis. DeMarrais (2004) defines an interview as “a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (p. 55). For this study, individual interviews were determined to be the best approach. Merriam (2009) states that interviewing is typically the best technique for case

studies of a few selected individuals, which this was. Interviews allowed the researchers to glean information directly from the participants and allowed participants to express their individual experiences without fear of judgment or retaliation, given that all the participants teach together in the same program at the same university.

Participants were instructors of HNRS 2000/3000 from various disciplines and levels of experience at a large southeastern university. The faculty varied in their professional status. All faculty had taught a minimum of half a semester of HNRS 2000.

Faculty were invited to participate in an interview and were provided a brief introductory message that explained the purpose of the interviews and the project it was for. All participants willingly agreed and accepted calendar invites prior to participating in the interviews. Each participant participated in a single individual interview. Every interview was conducted using Microsoft Teams and was recorded through that platform. Interviews lasted as long as the participants wanted to speak. Some took 15 minutes, while others took upward of an hour. One researcher participated in each interview, leading the interview. Each participant was asked a standardized set of questions (see Appendix). Each interview was transcribed.

Transcripts were then read and coded for themes, with a faculty mentor reviewing the coding done for accuracy. After themes were identified, transcripts were reread and tallied for the total number of instances of each using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Each time a participant mentioned a certain theme, it was marked as 1 instance. The mean was calculated to understand the average amount of times a topic was mentioned by each participant. Field notes were taken under each coded theme to understand what was said by each individual participant. Findings come from the coded transcripts of the nine interviews.

## **Findings**



As the responses were coded, several themes began to emerge throughout almost all the interviews: student engagement, team teaching, pedagogical approaches, ambiguity, research, and student outcomes. Each category will be discussed below.

### **Student Engagement**

All participants (n=9) mentioned student engagement throughout all interviews. Professors all stated that student engagement was hard within this class, with 6 participants (11 instances) mentioning that it was hard to get students to buy in to a human-centered design class that didn't function in a lecture format like other university classes. One participant said, *"It's hard to have the student understand why it's important, like why are we having you do these seminar classes when you have everything else you need to be doing within your degree programs?"*

Two participants (4 instances) mentioned that students were incredibly focused on the perks of being a member of the Honors College, rather than what they could take away from the curriculum. One participant said, *"They're there because they want, you know, they want the scholarship where they want to live in the nice dorms or they want to register for classes early..."* Another participant said, *"They say, 'I'm just here for the money' and 'I'm just here for the dorms' and... you don't hear that from one student, you hear that from like 8 students in the class of 42. That's a really hard pill to swallow. It makes me think... why am I doing this?"*

In addition, students were described as entitled (5 participants, 12 instances) and not okay with failing (6 participants, 8 instances) which surprisingly seemed to go hand in hand. One participant said, *"The number one challenge is they think first they know everything, then they find out they don't, and they think they're a horrible person."*

On the other hand, 3 participants (5 instances) mentioned that they enjoyed interacting with students from outside their home discipline, as it gave them a new perspective on the university and benefitted them as an opportunity they may not have had before. One participant reflected on this, saying, *“I’m exposed to a lot of students with a lot of different backgrounds that I may never get to see... And so, for me, it’s really exciting that I get to interact with students outside of my discipline and learn from them.”*

### **Team Teaching**

Regarding team teaching, all 9 participants mentioned the collaboration aspect of team teaching (22 instances). One participation positively voiced this, saying, *“I’ve learned how amazing a support structure and team teaching can be. It’s allowed me to grow as a faculty member. It’s provided me with new perspectives and looking at things through a different lens.”*

A total of 7 participants mentioned the benefits and drawbacks of having different perspectives on a team (21 instances). Many mentioned that they had never had the opportunity before to work on a multi-disciplinary team like this and that this team had become like a family to them. Value was placed on the different perspectives that each professor brought to the team, such as the difference in an art-based mindset versus a biology-based mindset. One faculty member said, *“I think it’s beneficial because it provides that interdisciplinary approach with multiple faculty from all over campus that you not get in your degree program.”*

The challenges relayed involved this being a large team that had too many opinions at times and that sometimes stronger voices diminished the values of those that were more hesitant to speak up. One participant said, *“Sometimes I feel myself being like, okay, we’ve got eight different opinions here. I don’t know where I’m going with that... I really like working with other professors and I will definitely be looking to co-teach again...but probably only with maximum*

*two other people.” The same participant, backed by similar responses to other faculty, voiced, “I don’t always feel comfortable sharing my thoughts and I don’t know that they’re gonna ask me back [to teach next year]. So, it’s like, how much should I invest my energy into this thing?”*

### **Pedagogical Approaches**

All participants were asked about the design of the curriculum and what pedagogical approaches they took. Various pedagogies were taken, but the most common were team-based learning (3 participants, 3 instances), flipped classroom (3 participants, 3 instances) and experiential learning (9 participants, 11 instances).

Team-based learning “is a structured form of small-group learning that emphasizes student preparation out of class and application of knowledge in class” (Brame, 2013). This is intrinsically built into the HNRS 2000/3000 curriculum, as students are placed in diverse groups and assigned a wicked problem to solve throughout the academic year. The team learning approach was described by a participant as *“trying to get students to work not only collaboratively together on the topic, but collaboratively with community stakeholders and identifying who those are out in the community.”*

Flipped classroom is a model of instruction in which “students watch recorded lectures for homework and complete their assignments, labs, and tests in class” (qtd. in Hertz, 2015). In HNRS 2000/3000, students typically watch videos and lectures on their own time. In-class, they work on assignments that involve higher order thinking with the professor acting as a facilitator rather than the lecturer.

Finally, experiential-learning is, as the name states, the process of learning by doing. Students in HNRS 2000/3000 learn by conducting interviews, creating solutions to their wicked problems, pitching their solutions, and pivoting in response to professor feedback. This was

voiced by many participants as a unique aspect of this curricula, with one participant saying, *“The uniqueness is the experiential learning, the immersive aspect of it...It’s not just lecture, it’s the immersive activity in doing that and in the critical thinking that takes place.”*

### **Ambiguity**

When asked about challenges related to teaching HNRS 2000/3000, 8 of the participants mentioned the ambiguity of teaching such a course, with 22 total instances. Participants described the class as *“muddy,” “building a plane while flying it,”* and *“constantly changing.”*

A great deal of this ambiguity was attributed to the team-teaching approach, in which the professors seek to teach the same curriculum separately once a week during HNRS 2000 and then regroup the next day to discuss what worked and didn’t work. Sometimes, one professor may present the information differently or not completely understand what was supposed to happen, resulting in ambiguity for both the professors and the students. One participant said, *“It almost feels like every time I’m involved with this course, it’s messy to the point that it’s like bordering on a train wreck.”*

This class was also described as a dynamic curriculum (8 participants, 18 instances), as it constantly ebbs and flows in order to match what each cohort of students needed more or less instruction on. It was described by one participant as *“a living curriculum that will constantly be evolving based on our student makeup.”* This was attributed to some of the ambiguity as well.

### **Research**

Research was discussed in detail by all the participants with a total of 25 instances, as the interview asked them to reflect on what teaching the course had taught them about conducting research. All participants said this course had forced them to approach research in a new way, whether that was in how it was done, the type of research conducted, or what was done in

response to the data collected. Some participants stated that they had never done research before teaching this course or that they had never done qualitative research prior to this course, only quantitative. One participant said, *“Before I had been exposed to qualitative research, I thought it was bogus... That’s not real data... But what I found personally is that those [quantitative] surveys really don’t capture the feelings of the experience... Instructors live in a world of feelings and those feelings matter. The qualitative data really captures those in ways I really am coming to appreciate.”*

Several participants mentioned that this research was unique in that it was a feedback loop. The professors collect data from the students about the class that they were teaching, analyzed and coded the data, and then shifted the class in order to best benefit students. They then would collect data about the new methodology and complete the loop again. Each iteration of the class was being informed by previous research.

### **Student Outcomes**

When asked what they hoped students took away from the class, 8 participants mentioned soft skills with 30 instances (the highest for any single category). Resiliency was specifically mentioned by 4 participants with 7 instances. Soft skills are defined as “non-technical skills that relate to how you work. They include how you interact with colleagues, how you solve problems, and how you manage your work” (Doyle, 2022). They include interpersonal skills, empathy, time management, networking, teamwork, creative thinking, conflict resolution, and many more skills (Doyle, 2022). One participant reflected that they are teaching students *“skills that they might not get in an English class or history class. There is no class like this that celebrates failure in the way that we do.”* Participants greatly emphasized that they hoped this class made their students better people, allowing them a space to safely fail, be comfortable

pivoting, and learning how to work with other people, rather than just absorb information like many other university classes. One said they hoped to teach “*resiliency and grit.*”

## **Discussion**

### **Interpretations**

This quantitative study sought to examine the faculty perception of their instructional role in an Honors College 5-credit hour, year-long required course for hundreds of incoming Honors freshmen. While few studies, if any, have looked at the faculty experience in a similar course, the literature that was consulted seemed to align with the findings of this study. Given that all participants spoke on how hard student engagement was in their interviews, it is not surprising that similar issues were seen in consulted studies. Bulakowski and Townsend found that students’ interest in grades over learning was one reason that faculty ceased teaching Honors-level courses, as well as student arrogance (1995). Unsurprisingly, a third of participants in this study reported similar struggles, though none gave this as their reason for leaving their position as an Honors faculty member. Over half of the participants mentioned the entitlement that Honors students appeared to have, particularly in regard to grades. This grade-focused attitude may indicate a common theme among the Honors student population, pointing to a larger educational issue where high grades are encouraged over a genuine love of learning.

Utilizing pedagogy that is less frequently implemented, such as the aforementioned flipped classroom, team-based learning, and experiential learning styles, can also have an impact on student engagement and buy-in. Miller et al. found that Honors faculty reported being able to experiment with new pedagogy as a positive to teaching these courses (2021). Faculty in this study also spoke of flipped classroom positively, mentioning the benefits it had and how they hoped to implement in their courses outside of this one. In addition to positive faculty

perception, students have also reported a higher positive perception towards flipped classroom, as well as greater understanding of course curriculum when flipped classroom is implemented in comparison to standard lecture-based approaches (Campillo-Ferrer & Miralles-Martinez, 2021). Honors courses that allow for faculty members to experiment with different pedagogy may allow for greater faculty growth and personal development, in addition to higher student achievement.

Ambiguity was mentioned repeatedly as a major challenge. The one word that kept being repeated in relation to this class sequence was unique. This class is described as unlike anything else being done at this university, at least as experienced by the participants. This uniqueness has lent itself, in some regard, to intense ambiguity. The iterative nature of the class, where the material is constantly evolving and shifting to match student feedback and the student population has led some professors to feel uncertain about their role, particularly for faculty that reported being newer in teaching this course. This ambiguity may point to a major drawback of a designing an innovative, constantly evolving course.

### **Implications**

Based on the diverse backgrounds reported by participants, particularly in area of study, journey to becoming an Honors faculty member, and approach to education, it is clear that those interviewed were part of an interdisciplinary team. Higher education literature indicates that interdisciplinary research, teaching, and degrees are on the rise across the globe (James Jacob, 2015). Many studies have been done on the benefits of interdisciplinary teaching for students, such as advanced critical thinking, cognitive development, recognition of bias, and toleration of ambiguity (SERC, 2021). However, few studies have been done on what being a member of the interdisciplinary teaching team is like. Understanding what the experience is like for those on the interdisciplinary teaching team provides a better understanding of how interdisciplinary team

teaching can be implemented in other areas, in a way that is mutually beneficial for both faculty and students. As arenas such as healthcare, non-profits, and more move towards an interdisciplinary approach, it is extremely important to understand how such approaches affect those in academia.

Students were often described in interviews as a constantly changing population, much like the curriculum these participants are engaging in. Given that a major hoped-for student outcome for many of the participants was soft skills, it's important to understand how education has shifted to encompass not just tangible skills, but non-physical interpersonal skills. For many years, educators have focused on job preparation. Now, many educators report that there is a shift towards these "employability skills" (qtd. in Fitzgerald, 2020). This is often being implemented at the secondary school level through group projects and project-based learning techniques (Fitzgerald, 2020). It may prove vital to prepare students at the higher education level through soft skills as well, in terms of time, money, and content.

### **Limitations**

The most obvious limitation of this case study is the size. Only nine participants were interviewed, which doesn't even comprise all the past or current faculty who have taught this course within the last five years. This case study cannot provide an accurate picture of what that experience is like for all faculty members at this university who have taught or are teaching this course, let alone what the experience is like for faculty members teaching similar courses/demographic at other universities. In addition, the individual who conducted the interviews is a current Honors College student who went through the course with some of the participants as their instructors. Participants may not have felt they could discuss challenges and



concerns as freely as they may have with someone who was conducting this research from outside of the institution, despite the explanation of confidentiality and privacy that was given.

In addition to the internal limitations of the study, the external context in which these faculty were interviewed is also necessary to note. These particular Honors courses were typically taught to approximately 250 freshmen or less in the years prior to this study being conducted. However, in the year of this study, faculty were teaching more than 300 students and were forced to greatly pivot in terms of teaching methodology, classroom management, and general curriculum. These massive changes and a much higher student to faculty ration may have caused some of the negative responses surrounding students as a population. Outside of the changes at the university, this study was also conducted right after the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic, where many of the participants were forced to begin teaching online with little to no warning and were forced to further pivot how they approached this course. While these interviews provide a great launching point for future studies on the faculty perception of team teaching, Honors-level courses, and more, it leaves much to be desired and uncovered.

### **Recommendations**

Given that this study can serve as a launching point for future studies and action, it may be fruitful to first do a larger study at this specific university with faculty from various Honors courses serving as participants. This could include Honors seminars which are taken by students in all years in various disciplines and are taught by a single instructor and Honors-level sections of general education courses, such as HLTH 1000, ENGL 1100, etc. Doing such research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of what it's like to teach Honors students as a population. On the flip side, conducting research that evaluates non-Honors team-taught courses may help to paint a picture of what team teaching looks like in other disciplines with a different

demographic of students. On a larger scale, research spanning several universities and Honors programs made provide more generalizable findings, as is common with a larger sample size.

In terms of utilizing this research, one participant recommended that the findings from this study, along with previous research conducted by the participants themselves could be integrated into an onboarding packet for future Honors faculty. As previously mentioned, one challenge with teaching Honors courses is that they are an addition to a faculty member's already extensive course load. Due to the challenges, as well as the demographics given by the participants, it is evident there is some turnover with Honors faculty members. Some of the participants had only taught the course for a few years and another had left due to time conflicts. Given this turnover, there have consistently been new faculty members each year teaching a curriculum that was described as dynamic and constantly changing. By creating an onboarding packet summarizing the benefits and challenges experienced by previous faculty, these new instructors may feel more equipped to take on their instructional role in this year-long Honors course.

### **Conclusion**

The data collected from Honors faculty reflects that teaching Honors curriculum as a team is unlike teaching a typical, lecture-style course at the 4-year university level. Being on an interdisciplinary team positively impacts the instructor experience, though some challenges are reported. In addition, teaching Honors students comes with a unique set of challenges and benefits that are not always seen with the general population of college students. Many participants report that they hope students take away soft skills, rather than hard skills that are often taught in lecture-style courses at the university level. The design of the Honors curriculum taught at this university is innovative, where research conducted on the student experience aims

to inform future iterations of the class. This design allows (and sometimes requires) that faculty use different pedagogical approaches, such as flipped classroom, game-based learning, and experiential learning.

While this qualitative study is limited in its scope, as there were only nine participants who were each interviewed individually, it can serve as a starting point for future studies on the impact of Honors education not just on the student, but on the faculty experience. Future studies may look at Honors seminars, faculty across several universities, and conducting focus groups, rather than individual interviews.

Education is a constantly evolving field. Curriculum ebbs and flows, new pedagogy is touted as superior all the time, and the student population is constantly changing and shifting. Often, students are placed at the forefront. It's often asked what the impact of education is on students, leaving educators without a voice in the conversation. As research continues to move forward, it is important that one shifts their focus at times to those providing education at all levels and in all curriculum designs to understand what the impact of teaching certain courses has on educators.

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