

Building an Honors Community that Values and Celebrates Faculty

KRISTINE A. MILLER

Utah State University

Abstract: The National Collegiate Honors Council’s “Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education” (2022) outlines the level of commitment, pedagogical innovation and inclusivity, mentoring, and intellectual leadership that honors programs and colleges expect from their faculty. These high expectations require institutional support structures that compensate faculty fairly, foster ongoing professional development, and build a sense of belonging and community in honors. Emphasizing the importance of faculty who teach, mentor, and guide honors students on their educational journeys, the author draws on firsthand experience to offer specific ideas about how to engage and reward honors faculty. The essay suggests that building a strong honors faculty goes well beyond the initial steps of hiring outstanding teachers and recruiting exceptional mentors. Ultimately, honors programs and colleges that visibly value and celebrate the work of all engaged faculty are most successful in forming lasting honors communities where faculty members feel that they truly belong.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; organizational commitment; college teachers’ compensation; administration of education programs; Utah State University (UT)—Honors Program

Citation: *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 2023, 24(2): 15–20

The National Collegiate Honors Council’s (NCHC) “Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education” includes the principle that honors faculty “are selected based on their preparation for and commitment to the pedagogy and curriculum of the program or college, their ability to provide intellectual leadership and mentoring for diverse students, and willingness to support the mission of honors” (5). In practice, these faculty members

“experiment with pedagogical and curricular innovation” and “employ a wide range of inclusive teaching practices” (4). Honors programs and colleges also engage faculty committees or councils with “issues related to honors curriculum, governance, issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion, policy, development, and evaluation deliberations, among other activities” (3). These high expectations for honors faculty demand that institutional support structures compensate faculty members fairly, foster their ongoing professional development, and build a sense of belonging and community in honors, topics that Lynne C. Elkes raises in the lead piece for this Forum. Each of these issues was central to the development of a university-wide honors program at Utah State University (USU), and this essay introduces some approaches that have helped us create a community of honors faculty at our land-grant institution.

A key first step in supporting faculty at USU was aligning compensation for honors teaching with institutional norms. The honors program offers between six and eight general education courses annually, and we invite faculty to apply individually or in teams to teach these experiential, discussion-oriented courses over two-year (for teams) or three-year (for individuals) rotations. In collaboration with the provost’s office, we determined the average institutional flat-fee course buyout for faculty moving into administrative roles, teaching in other areas, or taking research leave. We have defined “buyout” as the amount required to hire a short-term teaching replacement for one departmental course, and we encourage faculty and their departments to decide together whether on-load or overload honors teaching best serves students in their majors and supports the faculty member’s professional development. The honors program transfers funding annually to departments for appropriate distribution at the beginning of each term in which the course is taught; faculty also earn an honors course development grant at the beginning of their first year teaching the course. By rewarding the work of both faculty and their departments, fair compensation allows time and space for pedagogical innovation and idea-sharing across the institution.

This approach is grounded in NCHC’s shared principle that honors “serves as a campus laboratory for students and faculty to experiment with pedagogical and curricular innovation” that benefits the institution as a whole (4). We support such work by asking our honors teaching faculty to participate in annual inclusive pedagogy workshops, share pedagogical strategies with one another at biannual meetings, extend their work beyond the classroom through research and community-engaged projects, and bring what they learn through honors teaching into their research and back to their

departments. For example, one team-taught cross-disciplinary course called “Before Bears Ears: Public Lands, Utah, and You” included a class camping and service trip to Dinosaur National Monument and resulted in a team faculty publication: “From Dinosaur to Bears Ears: Engaging Utah’s Public Lands via Interdisciplinary Inquiry and Experiential Learning” (Holt and Finley). Our faculty also bring their honors teaching into their other pedagogical work. Honors courses such as “Dogs in Art,” “Revolution! Reacting to the Atlantic Revolutions,” and “Queer Manga” have all laid the foundation for new departmental curricula or other innovations in the faculty member’s home department.

In addition to offering faculty and their departments this opportunity to innovate, the USU Honors Program has also worked with the provost’s office and faculty senate to revise faculty code with specific language stating that honors teaching and research/creative mentoring are evidence of excellence in the promotion and tenure process. The code applies across faculty ranks to those eligible for promotion or tenure, including assistant/associate professors, professional career and technical education instructors, and faculty in term appointments (clinical or research faculty, lecturers, and professional practice instructors). At any time, faculty may request individualized reports outlining their honors teaching, mentoring, and service. The honors program delivers these reports in a standardized format for inclusion in promotion and tenure dossiers; a template for this documentation is available on our website (Faculty Roles Form Template). The institution’s departmental, college, and central promotion and tenure committees recognize this documentation as evidence of excellence in teaching and research/creative mentoring as outlined in the faculty code.

We have included mentoring alongside teaching in this promotion and tenure documentation with the aim of supporting all faculty, regardless of whether their role focuses primarily on research, creative production, or teaching. In keeping with our institution’s land-grant mission, the honors program has created flexible requirements that allow students and faculty to collaborate on a variety of projects that apply academic knowledge beyond the classroom in practical, professionally valuable ways (Miller). This work has included both short-term (contracts) and longer-term (capstone) projects involving research, creative activity, applications for national scholarships and fellowships, enrollment in a graduate course as an undergraduate, professional apprenticeships, undergraduate teaching and research assistantships, study abroad, and internships. Faculty who mentor honors students in these

experiences have not only involved students in their classrooms but have also trained undergraduate research/creative assistants who can, for example, work in labs or studios, compile literature reviews of existing publications on a topic of interest, or read textbook or presentation drafts for clarity. These faculty mentors have published or performed with honors students, showcased undergraduate work at national conferences, and helped students win awards and secure their own research or creative funding. While this work clearly benefits honors students, faculty find this mentoring both personally and professionally rewarding.

Creating an honors faculty also means extending the benefits of working in the honors community beyond the limits of formal teaching and mentoring. To that end, the USU Honors Program has intentionally created several informal structures for faculty engagement. Each term, for example, we run a very popular series of Honors Book Labs, which are small reading groups that allow faculty to engage in a series of four one-hour conversations with five honors students on a book of the faculty member's choice. Faculty apply to lead these ungraded, non-credit-bearing reading groups that rotate each semester and meet for an hour a week in the first month of the term. The program buys all books for students and faculty, assesses students' reflections on the experience in relation to honors learning outcomes, and awards honors points that count toward graduation with honors. This year, we have also initiated an Early Career Faculty Engagement program designed to welcome new faculty to USU and build affinity with the honors program. We have arranged monthly activities for fall term, including one-on-one invitations to have ice cream with an honors student, a hike with other new faculty and the honors P.E. hiking instructor, a faculty idea exchange focused on Honors Book Labs, and a special invitation to our holiday social. In spring, we will offer interested new faculty the option of becoming more involved with the honors program by leading their own Book Lab, serving as a reviewer of new-student applications, or recruiting an honors student to assist with the new faculty member's own research or creative projects.

We have found that an effective way to continue growing the number of honors-engaged faculty at our institution is to start conversations among faculty, as we will do at the Honors Book Lab idea exchange. Starting this fall, the Honors Faculty Advisory Board (HFAB) will take the lead in initiating these conversations. The HFAB includes one faculty representative from each of USU's eight undergraduate colleges as well as representatives from state-wide campuses, libraries, and the Office of Research. HFAB representatives

strategically orchestrate on the college level the departmental work of Departmental Honors Advisors (DHA), faculty liaisons who are appointed by their department heads and charged with bringing honors opportunities to faculty meetings, encouraging promising non-honors students to apply to the program, and working with current honors students in their department. HFAB representatives coordinate the work of their college DHAs to ensure that students and faculty across the college understand the opportunities and benefits offered by the honors program. Over the past five years, between 20–25% of full-time USU faculty have engaged with the honors program each year, and we hope that collaborative work of the HFAB and the DHAs this year will increase this percentage further.

Of course, such numbers tell only part of the story, and honors programs and colleges build lasting affinity not just by recruiting talented faculty but also by systematically honoring and celebrating these faculty members. To that end, the USU Honors Program features faculty teaching and mentoring at two annual signature events: the Honors Last Lecture in the fall and the Honors Medallion Ceremony in the spring. The Honors Last Lecture is a large-scale, student-driven event that features a talk delivered by our Honors Outstanding Professor of the Year. Students nominate faculty who have made an impact on their education; a committee of honors students interviews the nominees; and the committee selects one remarkable faculty member to receive the award of Honors Outstanding Professor and deliver the Honors Last Lecture. Introduced by the provost and the student nominator, the faculty member's lecture celebrates the extraordinary teaching at our institution with students, faculty, administrators, and community members. At the end of the year, we then showcase both graduates and their mentors at the Honors Medallion Ceremony. Faculty and administrators attend in regalia and students don caps and gowns for this graduation event, where honors capstone mentors present their graduates with medallions to wear at commencement and DHAs award their honors graduation certificates.

In addition to this range of approaches to "Creating an Honors Faculty," the USU Honors Program also recognizes the lasting impact of gratitude and teaches our students the value of appreciating their community by running an annual Gratitude Workshop before our fall "Thank-a-thon." This workshop engages students in writing personalized, specific thank-you notes and asks them to consider the impact of their gratitude on both themselves and those whom they thank. We specifically encourage students to thank the faculty members who teach their courses, mentor their research, and guide their

creative work. The honors program gives students co-curricular credit for attending the workshop and sending their notes to faculty, donors, staff, and others in their support network. As a faculty member who has cherished such expressions of gratitude from past and present students, I know that “Creating an Honors Faculty” ultimately means far more than hiring good teachers and recruiting willing mentors; valuing and celebrating the work of all engaged faculty is what builds a lasting honors community where faculty truly belong.

REFERENCES

- Faculty Roles Form Template. Utah State University Honors Program. Web. 9 Sept. 2023. <<https://www.usu.edu/honors/files/faculty-frf-template.pdf>>.
- Holt, Kerin, and Judson Finley. “From Dinosaur to Bears Ears: Engaging Utah’s Public Lands via Interdisciplinary Inquiry and Experiential Learning,” in *Ecopedagogies: Practical Approaches to Experiential Learning*. Eds. Ellen Bayer and Judson Byrd Finley. Routledge, 2022. Taylor & Francis Group, 2023. Web. 11 Sept. 2023. <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003221807>>.
- Miller, Kristine A. “Honors in Practice: Beyond the Classroom,” in *Building Honors Contracts: Insights and Oversights*. Ed. Kristine A. Miller. National Collegiate Honors Council, 2020. National Collegiate Honors Council Monograph Series, pp. 263–94.
- National Collegiate Honors Council. “Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education.” 2022. <https://cdn.ymaws.com/nchc.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/docs/shared_principles_&_practices/nchc_shared_principles.pdf>.

The author may be contacted at
kristine.miller@usu.edu.