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Ready for Business: Developing an Online Business Honors Course for Quality, Engagement, and Inclusivity

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Abstract: This essay presents the creation process for an online honors course in the field of business. Highlighting engagement, critical thinking, and inclusivity as central themes, the author describes the course’s inception, structure, outcomes, and post-teaching reflection. The pedagogical framework includes integrative current event assignments and team activities. Noting student responses as generally positive, the author suggests how future versions might expand on remote teamwork opportunities.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; curriculum planning; business education; online learning; Arkansas State University–Beebe (AR)—Honors Program

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INTRODUCTION

Developing a new course can be both exciting and daunting. Educators must carefully contemplate course goals and required course content as concrete focus areas along with the more abstract considerations of the impact on students’ lives and career goals (Kurt, 2020). The pandemic and the post-pandemic periods shifted extra focus on student well-being and engagement, leading to an important era of introspection and revitalization in university classes (The World Bank, 2021) along with a deeper focus on preparing students for the future workforce (Committee for Economic Development, 2020).

This new space for innovation can be energizing when combined with the tandem opportunity to have a far-reaching impact on the overall educational experience. Course development during the COVID-19 pandemic was especially challenging for maintaining high-impact and engaging classes (Miller, 2021), but devoted educators prevailed, lining the walls of their academic arsenal with a greater variety of tools. This time of swift adaptation to online and remote formats, likewise, poised honors college leaders to innovate within their programs, using new strategies to meet the needs of diverse constituents. As the adage goes, “there is no time like the present” when it comes to addressing an important change.

This essay details the context, considerations, and process for creating an honors program’s first fully online course, highlighting active engagement, critical thinking, and inclusivity as central themes and framing the course development within the related literature. A discussion of course reception follows, and final thoughts on possible improvements and future directions conclude the essay.

CONTEXT

In recent years, Arkansas State University–Beebe (ASUB), a two-year public university, has embarked on a journey to update and enhance its honors college experience. Requirements for application to the program include a minimum ACT or SAT score (for incoming freshmen), a minimum GPA, and an essay. Finalists complete an interview with the university’s honors committee prior to selection. Admitted students receive a scholarship along with special recognition at graduation and various extracurricular projects and engagement opportunities. Honors students must enroll in at least one honors course each semester, maintain a minimum cumulative GPA, and participate in community-related activities.

In 2021, a committee began the process of reviewing and revitalizing the honors curriculum, which included adding new courses to the offerings. The directors asked me to create an online version of an existing non-honors course using the newly established honors college objectives. This course would be unique for two reasons: (a) it would be the first entirely online honors course offered by the university, and (b) it would be the only professional studies course (a course not in the arts and humanities or sciences) in the rotation of offerings. Historically, the small-enrollment honors classes have been offered as either in-person or hybrid classes. The online format

could potentially be more inclusive and provide a greater reach for a diverse audience of honors students. This new class would be Honors Principles of Macroeconomics, offered in the field of business.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) described the honors college experience as distinctive and learner-directed as well as inventive and experiential, “[igniting] passion for lifelong learning and [encouraging] student creativity, collaboration, and leadership in the classroom and beyond” (NCHC, 2022, para.1). Honors college students develop lasting friendships and engage in memorable learning experiences that prepare them to excel in life after college. “Participation in honors programs appears to bring out the best in high-potential students, enabling them to maximize learning outcomes and enter society with an above-average potential to contribute positively throughout their adult lives” (Stohs & Clark, 2015, p. 241).

Honors colleges have great potential to contribute to academic and non-academic communities. “Universities and colleges across the country are well-served by the comprehensive value of honors programs and the role they play in enriching the entire university community and beyond” (Heckler & Kanelos, 2015, p. 165). Likewise, Bybee (2022, p. 75) claims that “bonds forged in honors may change the world—or they may just change an individual or a community.” These assertions are just samples of the affirmations that providing university students with the opportunity to participate in an honors college is a worthwhile endeavor.

Development of honors programs and courses must be thorough and intentional, with consideration of not only the positive aspects but the potential pitfalls. Administrators and instructors must beware of assuming that “they’re honors, they’re very bright students, they can survive without the resources” (Gardner, 2015, para. 28). Honors college students may historically be high achieving academically, but they need guidance and care just as other students do. Engaging students in nonstandard times, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, can be challenging for even the most prepared institutions, students, and faculty. Dotter and King (2021) speculated that the following challenges would need to be addressed:

- Ensuring students’ physical and mental health
- Maintaining student engagement

- Ensuring participation in honors classes/activities in spite of varied external demands
- Boosting student morale

In recent years, new developments in the structures of honors colleges have emerged. Yarrison (2021) suggested that honors programs shift from in-person only offerings to a more democratic and inclusive system that would allow for virtual and remote classes. While this suggestion was spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, it indicates a valid concern that honors programming may be excluding students who could benefit from such inclusion as well as enrich the program, university, and community as a whole. Yarrison (2021) continued on the topic of diversity: “honors programs are rarely diverse, because they are usually not inclusive.” Radasanu and Barker (2022) furthered this point by stating that “when students come from similar backgrounds . . . holistic educational aims are not well served” (p. 42); diversity enriches the learning experience (Astin, 1993). By allowing for diverse course delivery and participation options, students who might not be able to attend in person, such as non-traditional students, working students, and off-campus students, would have more flexibility in joining this valuable learning experience.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Principles of Macroeconomics, a sophomore-level survey of the macroeconomy, is required for all business majors and is included as either a requirement or elective for many other majors. The honors version of this course joins the four-course rotation of offerings at ASUB. All the other offerings also include general education content, making them easily compatible with the course requirements of students in nearly any field of study. Honors Principles of Macroeconomics is the first completely online honors college course offered at this university as other honors classes are in-person only or hybrid in structure.

Development of Honors Principles of Macroeconomics required consistency of course content with the non-honors Principles of Macroeconomics course for compliance with the state system’s transfer requirements. Arkansas’s public universities participate in a lateral course transfer system that allows pre-identified courses to transfer quickly and easily among institutions. Assignment composition and delivery can differ, though, with the honors version including an additional focus on structure and objectives related to

critical thinking and sustained virtual engagement. In fact, the mission of the honors program at this university is to “provide a vibrant educational environment for innovative teaching and learning within an interdisciplinary curriculum sparked by creative, critical inquiry and respect for a multiplicity of thoughts, experiences, and identities” (Supratman, 2022, p. 1). While instructors have much latitude in developing these honors courses, a set of objectives guided their creation:

University Honors College Course Objectives:

To help students develop effective written communication skills (including the ability to make effective use of the information and ideas they learn).

To help students develop effective oral communication skills (while recognizing that not all students are comfortable talking a lot in class).

To help students develop their ability to analyze and synthesize a broad range of material.

To help students understand how scholars think about problems, formulate hypotheses, research those problems, and draw conclusions about them; and to help students understand how creative artists approach the creative process and produce original work.

To help students become more independent and critical thinkers, demonstrating the ability to use knowledge and logic when discussing an issue or an idea, while considering the consequences of their ideas, for themselves, for others, and for society.

These objectives spoke strongly to the development of communication and critical thinking skills that, in combination with Dotter and King’s (2021) stated challenges (physical and mental health, student engagement, sustained participation, and student morale), formed the basis for the creation of Honors Principles of Macroeconomics. Assignment categories for this class included the following: (a) “In-the-News” interactive discussions, (b) intensive current events written assignments, and (c) exams with additional critical thinking (short answer) questions. In the creation of these assignments, the Stauffer’s category of learning skills in “21st Century Skills” remained at the forefront of development: critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication (Stauffer, 2022).

In-the-News Discussions

The In-the-News discussion assignments comprised the bulk of the weekly activities for students. Each week, beginning on Monday, students were assigned content to read, watch, and research. Students then watched the video prompt for the discussion assignment and made a series of responses throughout the week, with Sunday night being the due date for the assignment even though the discussion would remain open for the duration of the semester as desired or needed. The video prompt took the place of a traditional written prompt, and it accompanied basic assignment instructions regarding the number of posts, collegiality, and grammar/formatting. For accessibility, a transcript of the prompt was always available within the assignment. The length of the video prompt was typically two to three minutes, and it was always recorded within a week of the assignment's open date.

The topics of these discussions integrated both course content for the week and current events. Links to any articles or news stories mentioned in the prompt were included. A sample of news topics and their corresponding economics concepts from the class follows:

- Online education and the return on investment
- The “Big Mac Index” and inflation
- The Federal Reserve’s increases in interest rates and the Phillips Curve
- The Department of Labor’s proposed changes to the “gig” economy; and productivity

In addition to posting about the relationship between the topics in the video prompt and what they had read in the weekly content, students were also encouraged to pose questions, share related and opposing content, and bring up new topics of interest related to the chapter. This flexibility gave students the independence to discuss content of interest, complexity, and relevance while increasing student-to-student engagement and including regular feedback from the professor. Students were also encouraged to post video responses to increase engagement and provide a “human factor” to the discussions. About a quarter of the students posted in this way regularly.

Current Events Writing Assignments

The course included four written assignments, corresponding with the four units of content, in which students composed a formal paper with a

reference list for submission and individualized feedback. The first and third papers were completed individually while the second and fourth papers were completed in teams of two or three students. At first, students were apprehensive about participating in a team-based assignment in an online class, but the overall feedback was positive. Post-assignment, the students shared that they used phone conversations, Google docs, Zoom, and email to communicate. They did not use the team discussion boards provided as the other communication means were more convenient. After the first team written assignment, the students expressed interest in additional teamwork, prompting me to create the final written assignment as a team assignment.

The topics of the written assignments related economic concepts to current events. As an example, the final written assignment required students to compose a “State of the U.S. Economy” address, similar to a presidential State of the Union address. This team assignment posed a unique challenge to students who had varying perceptions of how the U.S. economy was faring and required that students integrate what they had learned throughout the course. Statements had to be supported by critical evaluation and evidence, a key facet of the course structure and scope.

Critical Thinking Short Answer Questions

While the students in this class covered the same concepts as the non-honors class, the approach to these topics pushed students to seek a deeper understanding of their meaning. To assess students’ ability to apply and synthesize the unit concepts, open-response questions comprised up to 20% of exams—more than in the non-honors classes. These questions presented realistic scenarios in which students would apply the terminology, concepts, and problem-solving processes covered in the units.

DISCUSSION

Evaluating the efficacy of a university-level course may not be a straightforward feat since various perspectives on what constitutes success must be considered. Student learning (content acquisition), student satisfaction, and program and course outcomes should certainly be measured with each iteration of a course. The eight students in this first iteration of Honors Principles of Macroeconomics course achieved at or above the cutoff score on the course assessment tool, which is tied to program-level and course-level outcomes along with the state’s course transfer system required topics. Students also

indicated satisfaction with the course structure, activities, and management with a 75% response rate and 83% or greater selecting “Strongly Agree” on all categories (ranked at 5 levels from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.”)

Subjective feedback in the form of open-response questions traditionally provides more concrete considerations for future versions of a course. Feedback in this course did not deviate from the norm. Students appreciated lecture videos, practice quizzes, live study sessions, quick feedback from the professor, and opportunities for engagement. Most respondents commented favorably on the level of engagement and responsiveness from the professor as an important element of the class, which tracks with Culver’s (2012) finding that instructor knowledge and caring impacted student satisfaction with online courses. Students suggested offering more regular study sessions to address complex topics, continuing to update lecture videos, and teaching additional business honors classes.

Informal discussions with students indicated satisfaction with the online format of the class. A few of the students lived over an hour away from the main campus and would have sacrificed valuable study or work time to make several trips to campus each week; likewise, increased fuel costs would have been incurred. Other students held full-time or heavy part-time jobs that might have prevented them from committing to a fixed class time. Similarly, some students were parents and had family obligations that caused them to have a nonstandard schedule.

Allowing a path to an honors education with opportunities for geographically remote students, working students, and student-parents can be an important factor in increasing inclusivity within an honors program. Research has long indicated that diversity in the classroom enhances student learning. Over two-thirds of faculty in a seminal survey on college classroom diversity suggested that learning in a diverse environment enriches the learning experience by exposing students to new perspectives, encouraging examination of their own perspectives, and developing critical thinking and leadership skills (ACE & AAUP, 2000), and Cognard-Black and Spisak (2021) presented a strong case for the need to encourage diversity and inclusivity within honors programs. The successful implementation of online honors courses, regardless of the field of study, may provide an important framework for answering the call for more inclusivity in honors colleges across the United States. Providing paths to membership that do not require in-person involvement—or at least in-person involvement for every class—could be a game-changer for enhancing racial, ethnic, age, and socioeconomic diversity.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Honors Principles of Macroeconomics will undergo continuous rounds of improvement to ensure that it best meets students' needs. With engagement and critical thinking as focal points for the course structure and content, as well as the increased access allowed by the format, I will work to enhance the educational experience. Future considerations include additional team-based research assignments, cross-curricular collaborations with other honors classes at the university or with students in other universities, and additional assignments involving video-based communication.

Recent remote collaborations and study abroad travel experiences at ASUB may provide excellent opportunities for Honors Principles of Macroeconomics students to learn *in situ* and interact with students of different cultures on common issues.

With the development of an honors research symposium on the horizon, a future assignment for consideration might be a course-spanning team or individual research project that culminates in a presentation at the symposium. This project would be even more impactful if it addressed an issue within the immediate community or state. Nevertheless, additional points of student-to-student engagement and student-to-faculty engagement, as well as more opportunities to apply concepts, can certainly strengthen the honors college experience.

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