

Assessment of Learning Outcomes in the Honors Program, 2004-05

Honors Program Goals

The Honors Program is designed to enhance students' critical thinking skills and teach effective communication. Honors Program seminars provide a forum for discussion as well as intensive practice in analysis, writing, and speaking. Students who complete 21 credits of Honors courses and achieve at least a 3.5 g.p.a. graduate with an Honors degree.

Assessment Methodology

Do Honors Program classes teach students in the Honors Program to think critically and communicate effectively? To answer this question, we have implemented the following assessment technique.

At the completion of each semester, Honors faculty are provided a form from the Honors Program with instructions to rate each student in their Honors class on a five-point scale (excellent, very good, good, average, needs improvement) in the following areas:

- * Performance in developing an argument
- * Performance in revising and polishing an essay into a finished work
- * Participation in intellectual discussion

The Honors Program tallies the results of faculty ratings for graduating seniors. Using Honors 200 ratings as a baseline, an average composite score is tallied for each of the three areas given above. Averages are also tallied in each area from the last Honors course graduating seniors complete. If students improve their critical thinking and communication skills over the course of their time taking Honors Program courses, we would expect graduating seniors to have higher average composite scores in their final Honors course than in Honors 200.

Honors Program Assessment, 2004-05 Assessment Results

Part 1: Quantitative measures

Faculty ratings from thirty-eight* 2004-05 graduating Honors Program seniors were tallied for Honors 200 courses and the last upper-level Honors course each student completed. Average composite scores in each of the three areas are given below.

	<u>1st Honors 200</u>	<u>Last Upper-level</u>
Performance in developing an argument	4.05	4.31
Performance in revising and polishing an essay	4.11	4.23
Participation in intellectual discussion	4.21	4.05

A comparison of Honors 200 average ratings with ratings from graduating seniors final Honors course indicates a slight upward shift in the first two areas (argument and essay development), which we would expect if students improved their skills over time. The slight positive difference noted above probably understates the actual change that occurs from freshman to senior year because faculty who teach upper-level Honors courses presumably have higher expectations of students and may therefore be more stringent in their ratings. The data indicate a small decline in students' participation in discussion. However, because the average ratings for both freshmen and seniors are greater than "4," which indicates that students are "very good" at discussion, we do not view the slight decline as a major area of concern.

Scale: Excellent = 5
Very good = 4
Good = 3
Average = 2
Needs improvement = 1

* Only graduating seniors who have faculty evaluations for both Honors 200 and an upper-level Honors course are included in this assessment study.

Part 2: Student comments

During senior exit reviews, we ask graduating Honors Program students to write a short essay describing their overall experience in the Honors Program. As the excerpts below illustrate, the main theme that emerged from the essays written by 2004-05 graduating seniors is how much these students value the seminar format employed by the Honors Program.

Excerpts from Honors Program senior essays:

The Honors Program has taken my critical thinking and writing to levels that have benefited all areas of my academic and personal life.

The intimacy of the Honors Seminar allows one to delve deeply into the subject at hand and linger there, reveling in its intricacies and beauty. This is the way learning was meant to be, sincere, intimate, and personal.

I have genuinely enjoyed my experience in the UWM Honors Program. The courses I have taken have provided me with skills necessary to continue my education in a graduate program.

The small class sizes and intellectual thinking brought about a different and beneficial experience not typically found in other courses. It's nice to be able to leave the architecture building to attend a class that has an interesting topic and feel like I belong to another "family" on campus.

Getting out of my comfort zone, which is in the back of a large lecture hall, and into smaller seminar classes has really helped me succeed at UWM. I believe that my honors classes have made me a more confident writer and leader.

Another aspect of the program that I enjoyed was the use of alternative teaching tools. For instance, in [my] Learning from the Dinosaurs [seminar] we actually went to the museum to learn from real fossils.

Throughout my years at UWM, I have enjoyed and benefited the most from my honors program coursework. The classes were staffed with the best professors and the brightest students on campus. The courses were small and emphasized critical thinking, articulate speaking and expressive writing. They taught me how to verbally express my ideas and views on various topics concerning our society and to be able to participate in an educated discussion with other intelligent students.

In Honors I learned the importance of revising my papers.

As far as classes go, the professors and course content are diverse and fascinating. The rapport that developed between students and staff made you want to do better in the class and put forth all your effort.

Honors Program professors took the time to know, challenge, and nurture me as a student and as an individual. The teaching style, as well as the topics offered, has truly added to my appreciation of not only the program, but of UWM as a whole.