Types of University Honors Courses

Stand-alone Courses: These offerings encompass the core of the University Honors class schedule each semester. These independent sections are exclusively for members of the University Honors Program and enrollment is normally limited to 20-25 students, depending on the course level. Some stand-alone courses are provided to the University Honors Program by colleges, schools, and departments. In other instances, the University Honors Program hires faculty members (with the consent of their department chair or program/school director) to offer stand-alone courses. As budget resources allow, the University Honors Program offers “enrichment funding” to faculty who wish to create special opportunities or need particular materials to enhance their courses. There are different kinds of stand-alone courses:

a. Cornerstone Courses: Cornerstones are Honors-only, Core Competency or General Education courses, not exceeding more than 25 students. These courses are reserved exclusively for University Honors freshmen. Entering freshman are encouraged to enroll in a Cornerstone class during their first semester at NIU.

b. General Education Courses: Honors-only, General Education courses constitute two-thirds of stand-alone University Honors offerings each semester. All University Honors students may enroll in these courses, which are limited to no more than 25 students. University Honors freshmen and sophomores are encouraged to enroll in at least one of these courses during each of their first four semesters at NIU.

c. Themed Learning Community: A Themed Learning Community (TLC) consists of two or three Honors-only courses taken in conjunction in order to examine a common theme across disciplines, such as the arts, humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. Faculty members create assignments that require students to draw on concepts from across the TLC classes for an enhanced, integrative learning experience. TLCs do not exceed more than 25 students and require co-enrollment in all courses linked in the TLC. TLCs give students the opportunity to engage deeply with a course theme, connect learning across courses in collaborative and active ways, develop relationships with peers and faculty, and ease the transition to college. TLCs are overseen and supported by the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning.

d. Honors Seminars: University Honors Seminars are Honors-only, Upper Division courses, which enroll 15 to 20 students. Seminars typically involve subject matter with a broad appeal to students that coincides with the intellectual and research/artistry interests of the faculty member. Seminars are intended to lend breadth to the student’s program of study; in fact, as a requirement for Upper Division or University Honors, students must take one such seminar outside of the their major. Given University Honors students are drawn from six undergraduate colleges, Honors Seminars normally do not carry prerequisites. The exception is a small number of Upper Division sections in the College of Health and Human Sciences reserved for University Honors students in the College of Health and Human Sciences.

Honors Mini-Sections: These courses consist of a select number of seats that are reserved by academic departments for University Honors students within a larger regular section of a course. Listed in MyNIU as a separate section, these courses assume students will be asked to complete course requirements that go beyond the expectations of the regular section and ensure a value-added honors experience rather than simply more work (e.g., additional paper). Ideally, students in Honors mini-sections will have greater access to and interaction with the faculty member teaching the course.

In-Course Contracts: Students can take a regular 300 or 400 level course as a University Honors course by working directly with the professor of the course to create a valued-added Honors experience in that course. An actual contract is negotiated between the professor and student and then approved by the department chair or program/school director and the University Honors Program.

Capstone: The Honors Capstone is the “senior thesis” or significant research or artistry project required for graduation with Upper Division Honors or full University Honors. Capstones are usually completed within the student’s major field but do not have to be within the major. The Honors Capstone is an in-depth, independent study experience with a true expert (the faculty advisor). The faculty advisor works closely with the student to ensure a high-quality learning experience. The University Honors Program has a general set of requirements for the Capstone, which are designed to ensure honors education goals are met. However, faculty advisors oversee the nature, method and other details of the project based on the standards and practices within their respective academic disciplines. The faculty advisor assigns the final grade for the Honors Capstone course. The process that guides the development of the Honors Capstone is analogous to that of a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, with a substantive complexity, score, and sophistication of the project set at a level appropriate for an undergraduate senior pursuing graduation with honors recognition.