

CHAPTER 6 *

Doing the Honors: Designing a Curriculum for a Year-Long Thesis Project

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Introduction

The personal librarian approach enables a deeper level of one-on-one contact with students beyond the typical reference interaction, and is often employed for student groups who may benefit from more targeted library services, such as student athletes, developmental education students, and international students. Honors students are another such cohort. The Honors Program at Berkeley College offers students the opportunity to participate with a group of their peers who are focused on pursuing a more academically rigorous path than what is ordinarily expected of undergraduate students. Students are admitted to the program either as freshmen or as continuing upperclassmen. Three components of the Honors Program are community service, advanced honors seminars (three courses taken during an academic year), and scholarship. Librarians support the third objective, which takes the form of a scholarly research paper on a topic of each student's choice, written during the upper-level seminars and typically twenty to fifty pages in length. The aim of this chapter is to describe the development and implementation of an Honors

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Thesis Project Curriculum through which students receive intensive research and writing support.

Background

Throughout 2012 and 2013, the Honors Program director met with the library's information literacy coordinator to establish a method for librarians to support honors students writing their theses. From these discussions, the coordinator proposed a highly distilled version of the research process rooted in the four concepts of exploration, identification, development, and completion. Following ongoing conversation with support staff and faculty regarding these concepts, the director's vision evolved from a single training module to a learning community support structure that would guide students from idea formation to sharing their work. This model ensures personal guidance, one-on-one attention, ongoing development, and progress monitoring in a way that a "one-shot" video tutorial could not. These values were prioritized by the director and led to the formal adoption of the curriculum and learning community. The learning community is a cohort of honors students matriculating through a year of seminars together, assisted by support staff. Learning communities are assigned a number based on which honors cycle they are participating in (e.g., Learning Community #5, the fifth Honors Program cohort, or LC5, LC6, etc.).

The development of the Honors Thesis Project Curriculum took place over what can be described as four "phases"—exploration and planning, interim execution, implementation, and preliminary revisions—articulated in figure 6.1. This chapter is primarily concerned with the implementation phase.

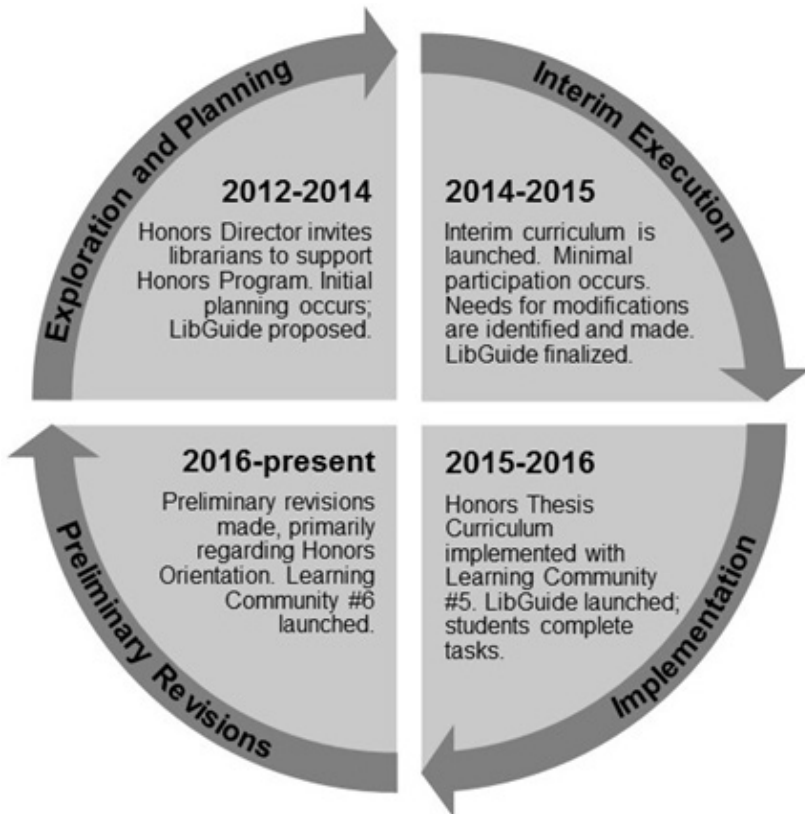
During the exploration and planning phase, the information literacy coordinator was invited to collaborate with honors seminar faculty and Writing Center staff to strategize how best to reorganize the final scholarship component across the full academic year. Historically, the paper was researched and written entirely in the students' final term; the new curriculum was intended to be integrated with all honors seminar curricula so that students worked concurrently on seminar coursework and preparations for the culminating research requirement. Rather than one video module, the library planned to support with the following:

- a LibGuide organized to serve as a hub for general information and to host research training video tutorials, building progressively through the year;
- active learning elements such as worksheets and opportunities for exploration of resources beyond the college;
- digital badges awarded to students as they progressed through the modules;

- additional writing and citing training in collaboration with the Writing Center;
- a personal librarian to foster individual relationships and improve outcomes, and a personal writing consultant to provide the same.

Figure 6.1

Honors Thesis Project Curriculum Development Phases



Following exploration and planning, an interim curriculum was executed beginning in late 2014. The most critical development, however, and the basis of this chapter, was the implementation of a full Honors Thesis Project Curriculum for the 2015–2016 academic year. This curriculum has served as a microcosm of the library’s ideal information literacy program: well-structured, integrated within the larger curriculum, and serving to advance interdepartmental collaboration, promote student-librarian relationships, and improve student outcomes.

Librarians conducted research to explore potential directions and best practices that had not been considered for this thesis curriculum. The list of citations in Anna Marie Johnson's 2012 article, "Information Literacy Instruction for an Honors Program First-Year Orientation," was enormously helpful and served as a valuable literature review and compilation of recent sources on trends in librarian support of honors programs.¹ Additionally, a large number of library websites and LibGuides were reviewed, but no public resources were identified with the same depth of curricular support as this effort.

During the summer of 2015, the librarians finished creating the Honors Thesis Project Curriculum. The newly developed curriculum provided scaffolding for honors students to take part in the information lifecycle over the course of an academic year: the first term was dedicated to topic exploration; the second focused on introductory research and compiling initial sources; the third highlighted developing a thesis statement and creating an annotated bibliography; and the fourth targeted the writing and editing process. Students would craft the final paper and an accompanying presentation for a culminating honors symposium, which gives them an opportunity to share and showcase their scholarly work.

In preparation for the initial launch of the Honors Thesis Project Curriculum, the Writing Center, honors seminar faculty, the honors program director, and three honors librarians created multiple learning components to guide both students and faculty through the year-long thesis process, as outlined in the table on the next page.

The new Thesis Project Curriculum, its accompanying LibGuide, and the digital badge system were implemented into the Honors Program in the fall of 2015. During an introductory session, librarians and writing consultants met the incoming honors cohort, distributed the curriculum packet, and answered initial questions about the thesis process.

Honors students were assigned librarians by class section to divide the work evenly. Students were required to meet at least once with their librarian during each of the first two terms, and that librarian became responsible for providing individual feedback on two bibliography submissions.

Tracking of completed tasks began right away. As quizzes and e-form submissions were received, an internal spreadsheet was kept updated for librarians, writing consultants, and faculty, while the LibGuide-embedded badges spreadsheet was updated for students to view their progress.

For the graded components of the thesis curriculum, including the source identification (preliminary ten-source list) and annotated bibliography (full twenty-five-source list), librarians and writing consultants held a norming session to ensure consistent scoring against the rubrics. These submissions were graded by each student's assigned librarian and then factored into their seminar grade at the professor's discretion.

Learning Object	Purpose	Developed with...	Deliverable
Curriculum packet (thesis project syllabus)	Divides the thesis process into manageable stages with clear deadlines; links each task to a particular stage within the process as a whole	Microsoft Word	PDF
Learning outcomes document	Outlines the expected skills and knowledge that students acquire throughout Honors Thesis Project Curriculum	Microsoft Word	PDF
Video tutorials	Provides students with research essentials needed to gain knowledge to complete Honors Thesis Project (basic research, advanced research, and the lifecycle of information; and an APA citation tutorial provided by the Writing Center)	PowerPoint; Camtasia; Screencast.com; articulate storyline	LibGuide- embedded video tutorials
Tutorial quizzes	Ensures students have met skills mastery requirements	EmailMeForm. com	LibGuide- embedded electronic forms
Electronic submission forms	Allows librarians to track and view student submissions by time stamp, and to provide immediate messages to students outlining additional requirements; sends automatically graded quizzes directly to students and librarians	EmailMeForm. com	LibGuide- embedded electronic forms
Rubrics	Sets a standard for scoring and providing feedback on the source identification, annotated bibliography, and Final Thesis Project assignments	Excel	PDF
Digital badges	Offers visual incentive to complete each milestone on time and successfully; fosters self-accountability and competition among students, who can view everyone's badge progress on the private LibGuide	Credly.com; Google Sheets	Badge images displayed on LibGuide- embedded spreadsheet

Beginning in 2016, Berkeley College converted its academic calendar from four quarters to three semesters, which altered the distribution of goals and assignments across the terms. For the 2016–2017 honors cohort, several revisions were made to the curriculum, although the overall process remained the same. The most significant change was the addition of a standalone Thesis Project Orientation, which aimed to clarify some of the most common questions students had throughout the process, and to have them complete some preliminary tasks, including basic research skills and potential topic selection, prior to enrollment in their first honors seminar in the fall. This way, before any of the tasks are incorporated into their honors course grades, expectations and workload are revealed early, along with a sense of the bigger picture. Librarians increased efforts to include honors faculty at every stage of planning, including rubric norming sessions when scoring the annotated bibliographies, and incorporating honors tasks into the syllabi and blackboard each term.

Partnerships

Throughout all phases of the initiative, librarians, Writing Center staff, and faculty members met in collaboration with the honors program director to develop the Thesis Project Curriculum. Meetings occurred each term during exploration and planning, increasing to nearly monthly in the lead-up to the interim execution phase (see figure 6.1).

The fundamental challenges of partnership are largely predictable and can be attributed to insufficient communication and differing perceptions and expectations. Lack of clarity of vision contributed to these challenges; no one stakeholder asserted a strong unifying voice. Seeking a fully collaborative experience, librarians were reluctant to assert this sole leadership role, despite frequent empowerment from the honors program director. Seminar faculty, brought in from different departments to support the honors program, were less familiar with the process of curriculum development and at times did not prioritize thesis requirements and the need to communicate a consistent message to students. This led to miscommunication of expectations, deadlines, and assignment values, which did not go unnoticed by students: one reflected in her exit survey, “The professor, [the director], and the librarians would, at times, give different directions and different due dates. This made me stress even more, since I was never really sure who to listen to.” In the future, librarians will work to establish roles and responsibilities earlier in the process to ensure clarity for faculty, support staff, and, most important, the students.

Despite these challenges, major benefits arose from the partnerships in this initiative: enhanced interdepartmental relationships, more creative liberties, and new perspectives on student learning.

Librarians' relationships with staff from other departments grew and developed through this sometimes challenging partnership. The curriculum served as a common frame of reference even to librarians and Writing Center staff who were not working firsthand with the honors students; librarians came quickly to know which of their colleagues were supporting the honors cohort, and the same was true of the Writing Center staff. Because the honors program was fairly small and intimate (approximately fifty-three students at the outset of the thesis project) and some students transferred from one campus to another, having visible and easily recognized staff helped our multi-campus library system direct students to the appropriate liaisons in a timely manner. Furthermore, automated responses were added to our chat service and Library Knowledge Base (FAQs), so all librarians could be of assistance to honors students.

Working under the auspices of a program director allowed for creative liberty. The reward of demonstrating trustworthiness is being free to make recommendations and trust that they will be taken seriously: librarians had nearly complete autonomy in determining the format and content of the curriculum, from developing logistical documents such as the curriculum packet provided to students, to the actual tutorials and assessments the students completed. When the director expressed confidence in the librarians' abilities, meeting the research needs of the program became a responsibility librarians eagerly embraced, for example, by setting project deadlines and creating rubrics before submitting to other stakeholders for approval.

Partnering with multiple departments enabled all stakeholders to view students from different perspectives and share that knowledge with each other. Students seeking support from writing consultants are in a different phase than those in the midst of research in the library. Faculty benefit from having a support team to corroborate their perspectives on student engagement and quality of work, or to counter those perspectives with additional insights as necessary.

Reflection

After the new curriculum was launched, there were several aspects of this project that improved from the interim implementation (see figure 6.1). First and foremost, the articulation of the thesis project as a year-long curriculum delivered to students (including the curriculum packet and LibGuide) was an effective tool that allowed students to map out their project. Despite occasional miscommunications, having the curriculum also helped keep students accountable: whenever there was uncertainty about a task or deadline, the support staff could point to the same document with the same deadlines.

The LibGuide, which housed all e-forms, tutorials, quizzes, and the digital badges, acted as the Curriculum Packet come to life; it was organized in a simple and consistent format that allowed students to become familiar with the layout and navigate with ease. The e-forms worked like a well-oiled machine, providing automatic grading of quizzes and instantaneous feedback to students. Using these forms reduced the workload for librarians and provided them with automated updates to ensure students were staying on task and not falling too far behind.

Assigning librarians to students for a complete year was a successful example of the personal librarian model. Students communicated with librarians in person, through email, on the phone, and over Skype, and took comfort in having the ability to go to the same person with any questions they might have. In fact, 89 percent of exit survey respondents (twenty-five out of twenty-eight) indicated that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that their “experience working with honors librarians was helpful.” In turn, being assigned to a specific set of students allowed the librarians to provide motivational support and engage more deeply in open, honest communication.

The librarians’ approach to designing this curriculum has had a strong impact on other long-term library initiatives: planning, timelining, and executing multifaceted team projects, especially those with instructional components, has been streamlined and more widely adopted.

Sharing this undertaking with librarian colleagues has increased awareness of holistic methods of curriculum design, instruction, and assessment, and has opened up a library-wide conversation about the value of undergraduate research and the need to archive student scholarship.

With the involvement of a wide variety of disciplinary faculty and support staff, librarians are able to make the case to the larger college community for the personal librarian model, and in turn have drawn attention to a wider variety of ways librarians can support courses.

The personal librarian approach has positively influenced honors librarians in their one-on-one reference support skills with all students. Because they engage in regular, mandatory meetings with honors students and see the results of those interactions, there has been a refinement to reference interview techniques and lines of questioning when working with students on any research project.

Assessment

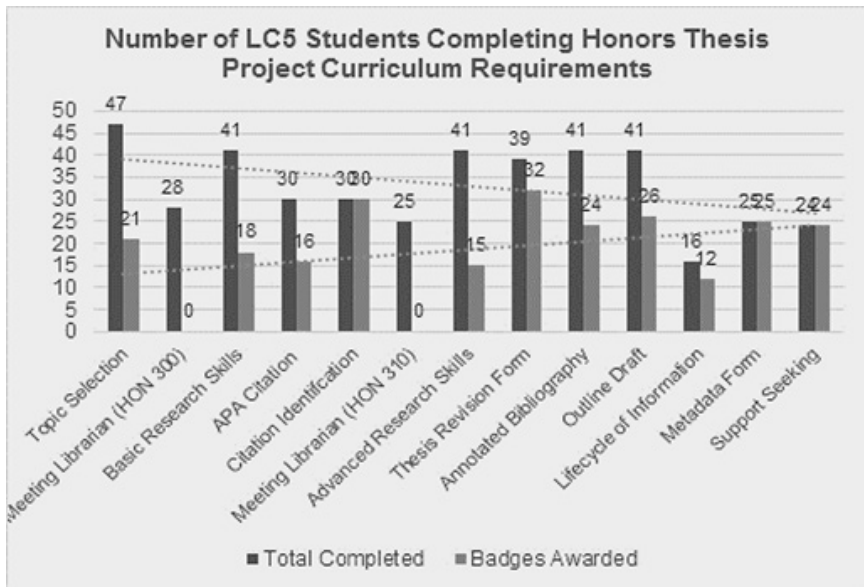
The nature of the curriculum allows for continuous assessment of student learning and their progress through the stages of a research project. The following methods were used for evaluation:

Tracking documents. To keep track of the students' progress, a single Excel tracking document was created that included columns for all of the tasks and major graded assignments. This was used as a tool for librarians to check in with students as needed if there was an indication that they were falling behind in the completion of tasks. The document was also sent monthly to the faculty so that they could integrate thesis task grades into final grades for each honors seminar.

Completion rates of thesis project tasks. With the development of the tracking documents, analyzing completion rates was simplified. The cohort started out strong during the first seminar with an 89 percent completion rate of thesis tasks. In the next two terms, there was a decrease in students enrolled in the program as well as a decrease in task completion rates: 53 percent and 77 percent, respectively. By the final term there were only thirty-two students of the original fifty-three still in the program, and of that thirty-two only 57 percent were able to complete all of the tasks. Completion of thesis tasks was linked with overall success in the honors program. The majority of students who consistently completed tasks and received badges persisted in and successfully graduated from the program. For a full breakdown of the number of students who completed each task, refer to figure 6.2 below.

Figure 6.2

LC5 Task Completion Rates and Badges Awarded



Graded assignments. The two major graded assignments were the source identification and the annotated bibliography. The source identification was used to ensure that students had exposure to introductory research skills, had settled on one topic, and had begun their research. After the submission of the source identification, it was evident that students needed additional support, and librarians provided a template and clearer instructions in preparation for the annotated bibliography. More than half of the students improved their scores from the source identification to the full annotated bibliography (an average improvement of six points on a 100-point scale). The annotated bibliography was one of the final tasks students needed to complete. Regardless of their grade, students could not register for the final honors seminar unless this was submitted.

Figure 6.3

All 12 Digital Badges Available for LC6



Badges. Honors students are typically motivated by competition, and the honors program director suggested that librarians and other support staff find a way to incentivize or gamify the student's completion of the Honors Thesis Project tasks. This need was met through the development of a digital badge system, meant to be challenging and reward only those students who truly excelled. The librarians designed and developed ten digital badges, created using the web-based platform Credly (see figure 6.3). Although students have the option to register for Credly, the badges were used internally, displayed for honors students and faculty in an Excel spreadsheet on the LibGuide, but not available to the public. Each badge represented a task students needed to complete related to their Honors Thesis Project. Throughout the curriculum, for example, students needed to view five video tutorials and complete accompanying quizzes. If a student completed each quiz on time and received 80 percent or higher, they would earn the digital badge available for that task. By achieving the badge, students were demonstrating that they retained the content needed to pass the quiz and were able to keep up with the deadlines.

The remaining badges were awarded when a student completed additional tasks on time, including the annotated bibliography, an outline, and meeting with the support staff. The badge system doubled as an assessment strategy: badges enabled support staff to see which students were completing tasks on time and with a passing score. Unfortunately, none of the students from LC5 was able to achieve all ten badges; however, 66 percent (twenty-one students) achieved more than half (six to nine) of the badges, and 34 percent (eleven students) achieved half or fewer (one to five) of the badges. This data has also allowed the support staff to reflect on the tasks, the level of expectations, and the timing of each submission.

In addition to the assessment methods above, the support staff collected feedback from various stakeholders and have already made improvements for LC6. For example:

Grading. Faculty were uncertain about how to incorporate and give weight to tasks that they did not create or grade and requested that in future iterations, more guidance be provided. In LC6, all seminars will allocate 30 percent of the final grade to Honors Thesis Project tasks.

Writing timeline. Writing consultants recommended that more time be allocated for students to draft their papers, and students from LC5 provided the same feedback in their exit survey. For LC6, students will have a full semester to revise and finalize their paper and will begin drafting the semester before.

Presentation skills. All stakeholders agreed that additional support is needed for presentation development and delivery at the Honors Symposium. Optional drop-in workshops to support these needs are under consideration.

Consistent message. Students expressed frustration that they often received different messages from seminar faculty and support staff, particularly about deadlines and grading. For LC6, faculty are including all tasks in their syllabi, and more robust collaboration between support staff and seminar faculty will occur.

Metacognitive assessment. The Teaching and Learning Commons suggested that students reflect on their experience during each seminar. This feature would allow the students an outlet to reflect on their experience during the thesis process and would allow support staff to make improvements based on common themes identified by the cohort. Support staff are exploring such platforms, publications, and procedures for LC6.

Recommendations/Best Practices

An institution wishing to implement a research curriculum for an undergraduate cohort should be mindful of the following:

Prioritize clear vision and long-term planning. In late 2013, when supporting the Honors Program was first proposed, few of the stakeholders could have imagined the direction this project would take. The value of long-term planning was critical. Librarians used a timeline in late 2014 while developing curriculum documents and throughout 2015 while reconstructing the Lib-Guide. All stakeholders must buy in and share the same vision in order to make long-term planning feasible.

Remain willing to collaborate. While librarians, writing consultants, and administration were all responsible for the creation of the Honors Thesis Project Curriculum, not all stakeholders were as collaborative as others, and seminar faculty members could have been brought into conversations earlier to ensure lasting and consistent support.

Assert different influence strategies. Librarians were responsible for regularly keeping, sharing, and disseminating data about the thesis project (e.g., percentages of task completion, student topics, and thesis statements) to stakeholders, and attempted to inspire support through rational persuasion. However, assuming this would rally participants was not enough. A coalition/participatory style of influence might have been more successful, appealing to stakeholders' innate commitment to a larger effort because of the benefits it derives for them individually, for the whole, and for the most important stakeholders, the students. Instead of merely reporting numbers such as scores and task completion rates, which can be overlooked if not immediately relevant, librarians could instead share student comments and anecdotes, progress in thesis writing, the development of ideas, etc., which would have inspired greater support for the research component of the honors program.

Continually consider student perspectives. An essential lesson is that students value structure and process. Many students responded positively to the division of tasks for the curriculum. Sixty-four percent of exit survey respondents (eighteen out of twenty-eight) agreed that "the Honors Thesis Project was divided into manageable stages." It is important not to assume honors students' knowledge or ability. While many may be more equipped in some ways than an average undergraduate to tackle research projects of greater magnitude, many may also need the same level of support as their non-honors peers. Students are a key stakeholder, yet they were minimally involved in the planning of this curriculum. With the development of an exit survey, student input is now being more directly incorporated.

Conclusion

The creation of the Honors Thesis Project Curriculum at Berkeley College has legitimized librarians as faculty among their peers and has given them an

influential role in the development of a burgeoning program. Furthermore, they have a critical voice in authentically integrating information literacy skills and concepts in a way that demonstrates their value. Despite obstacles, honors librarians have been able to demonstrate the value of collaboration to support a robust undergraduate research program. By working with departmental stakeholders, meeting regularly, and engaging in ongoing revision, the librarians have developed a curriculum that successfully supports a new target group of students, making the research process a rewarding personal learning experience.

Notes

1. Anna Marie Johnson, "Information Literacy Instruction for an Honors Program First-Year Orientation," *Communications in Information Literacy* 6 (2012): 143

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Johnson, Anna Marie. "Information Literacy Instruction for an Honors Program First-Year Orientation: Lessons Learned Over 15 Years of a Sustainable Partnership." *Communications in Information Literacy* 6, no. 2 (2012): 141–50.

