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CHAPTER TEN

Facilitating Feedback: The Benefits of Automation in Monitoring Completion of Honors Contracts

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As we have seen in this volume so far, contract courses are an increasingly valuable pedagogical strategy for maintaining access to and demand for honors education. Administered with the “[i]ntentionality, transparency, [and] consistency” that Richard Badenhausen proposes in his opening essay (17), they can even, as Margaret Walsh suggests, help “shift [students’] focus from getting *out* of course requirements to getting *into* new and different courses to advance their capacity to learn” (40). While good reasons to offer contracts clearly exist, administering them nevertheless presents challenges. This essay considers process and pedagogy, with the aim of empowering both students and faculty to explore the pedagogical possibilities of contracts. At the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), we identified two interrelated challenges with the contract

process: 1) the approval and assessment of contracts and 2) the impact of contracts on faculty members' workloads. The UNR Honors Program streamlined the approval and assessment of honors contracts for students and faculty by updating our contract form and introducing a qualitative online assessment tool to help faculty evaluate student progress on honors learning outcomes. Our quantitative and qualitative data suggest that such changes make a positive impact on both student learning and faculty engagement for honors programs and colleges considering contract automation and streamlining.

UNR is a midsized public land-grant university. According to internal census data, the number of undergraduate students enrolled at UNR was 17,513 in fall 2018. The UNR Honors Program is likewise a midsized program that serves nearly 500 students, approximately 3% of the total undergraduate population. Honors students come from all of the university's six colleges (agriculture, business, education, engineering, liberal arts, and science) and four schools (health sciences, journalism, medicine, and nursing). Although the College of Liberal Arts is the largest academic unit at UNR, a majority of honors students are actually STEM majors; since fall 2011, 63% of incoming students have declared majors in the Colleges of Agriculture, Science, and Engineering. These demographics inform the honors program's approach to contracts and shape the content of those contracts, which are designed to empower students as they practice critical thought and master practical skills in lab and field techniques. Kambra Bolch notes that progress in many academic degrees, particularly in STEM disciplines, requires adherence to inflexible course schedules that leave little room for exploration beyond the major; such inflexibility is often incompatible with honors curricula that encourage students to sample a variety of honors general education offerings in their first and second years. The UNR honors curriculum, composed of first- and second-year courses in the arts, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics, emphasizes general education courses that teach students the value of the liberal arts. Here, as at other institutions represented in this volume, STEM honors students

are particularly interested in continuing honors work by connecting the skills they have learned in their early honors coursework to more specialized technical skills in their upper-division major courses. Advanced courses in such disciplines as biochemistry, biology, engineering, mathematics, and psychology are particularly popular as contract options among our students, with some representative courses such as Principles of Genetics, Fluid Mechanics, Mathematical Modeling, and Perception inspiring dozens of contracts over the last several years.

Adding to “the difficulties imposed by structured curricula” like those that characterize many STEM majors, observes Bolch, are the “significant numbers of college credits” that the majority of honors students now bring with them to college and that “typically [fulfill] university general education requirements, thus discouraging students from taking honors courses which [fulfill] those requirements” (50). Annmarie Guzy highlights the illogic of this state of affairs in which “the honors students we have admitted based in part on their willingness to take on challenging coursework such as AP classes are now struggling to find enough liberal-arts-based honors electives to complete an honors program” (3). The challenges of AP/IB/dual-enrollment credit affect UNR honors students across all disciplines, including those in the liberal arts and social sciences, with the result that while they all do take some honors general education courses, most students also elect to complete at least one contract course at some point during their time in the program. In fact, many students choose to complete several contracts over the course of their undergraduate careers since we have chosen not to limit the number, instead ensuring the quality of the contract courses a student may complete by focusing on their pedagogical value. To wit, between the fall 2010 and spring 2017 semesters, 1,061 students contracted for honors credit in 618 courses taught by 429 distinct faculty members across all of UNR’s colleges and schools.¹ The topics of these contract courses, all of which must be undertaken in non-honors courses of at least three credit hours at the third- or fourth-year level, fall squarely outside the boundaries of UNR’s existing general education honors curriculum. They do

support honors learning outcomes, however, by allowing collaborative learning between student and faculty mentor. Students electing to pursue honors contracts also enjoy credit-for-credit matching of contract course credit to honors course credit; thus, a successfully completed contract in a three-credit course yields three honors credits.

With 60–80 honors students electing to contract for honors credit in any given semester, contracts collectively engage 25–35% of the total UNR honors population each year. Importantly, some of these students would not be continuously engaged in honors coursework if it were not for the contract option. In this sense, contracts represent an important opportunity for our students to make progress toward honors graduation and, practically speaking, for the program to retain advanced undergraduates who have already completed their general education requirements; this group includes continuing and transfer students as well as entering students who have accumulated significant AP/IB/Dual Enrollment credit prior to matriculation.

This positive impact on retention results at least in part from the outstanding mentoring experiences that faculty members create for students engaged in honors contracts. Contract courses at UNR, as elsewhere, are sometimes initially undertaken out of convenience. In several highly subscribed STEM courses, for example, faculty have, over time, developed parallel syllabi for students wishing to earn honors credit; while these ready-made extensions of the course do add pedagogical depth and value, they limit the student's role in designing the contract experience. More often, however, contracts have taken the form of short-term mentorship experiences that allow students to work closely and creatively with faculty members who guide them as apprentices in their chosen fields. This mentoring relationship can be especially important for arts and humanities majors, who often do not enjoy the kind of ongoing mentorship more readily available to STEM majors working in a research lab. In fact, it is often the case that contracts enable arts and humanities majors, like STEM students, to develop relationships with the faculty who ultimately supervise their senior thesis research.

Such early and sustained contact with thesis mentors sets students up for success when they enter our pre-thesis research methods course and engage in their thesis research. In the research methods course, students who have completed contracts enjoy the benefits of input from a trusted faculty member during the crucial period when they are developing their research questions and methodologies. Students can then begin to explore some of these research questions as they lay the groundwork for their thesis projects. One of our Spanish majors who wrote a thesis on forensic linguistics, for example, also completed a contract project on Spanish-language Miranda rights in an advanced linguistics seminar taught by her mentor. The connections between contract and thesis work can give honors undergraduates unprecedented access to both broad and deep knowledge of a subject, guided by a trusted faculty mentor. At a time when the liberal arts, in particular, as Jeffrey J. Selingo observes, are under threat at institutions across the United States, the value of honors contracts that expand and deepen students' understanding of their own fields, particularly in relation to other disciplines, becomes increasingly evident.

Among UNR honors students, a desire for such enhanced learning is clear in the variety of contract projects proposed each semester. Alongside more traditional contracts that result in expanded term papers or supplemental research essays, projects that allow students to gain practical experience, either through research apprenticeship in a discipline or community-engaged learning, are growing in number. Effective advising has been instrumental in this shift toward applied contract projects. Honors advisors frequently guide students interested in completing contract courses in selecting an appropriate course for such work and, by leveraging knowledge of previous contracts in those courses and disciplines, assist students in developing basic project ideas that they can use to open discussion of a contract with their instructors. Broad dissemination of guidelines and learning outcomes for honors contracts via the program's website and email also prepares faculty to respond to requests from students to mentor contract projects.

In recent semesters, for example, a fine arts major taking a sound and image course developed a practical project focused on professional skills: the student managed a collaborative concert and sound-reactive visualization screening, taking responsibility for computer and AV equipment and producing recordings of the performances. Similarly, a veterinary science major studying the physiology of reproduction produced an instructional video on pregnancy detection in cows; in the student's words, the video covered "methods of pregnancy checking, anatomic considerations, ultrasonography principles," and other practical topics for livestock management. Such projects highlight the ways in which contract courses serve both students, who have the opportunity to complete a project with real-world applications, and faculty, who reap the benefits of dedicated student participation in their research and creative activities. Moreover, successful contracts all meet our honors learning outcomes of 1) broadening and deepening students' experience of their major fields, 2) helping them to forge mentoring relationships with faculty, and 3) giving them a platform for demonstrating specific knowledge and skills.

STREAMLINING HONORS CONTRACTS FOR PEDAGOGICAL SUCCESS

Because contracts help students meet specific honors learning outcomes, making the opportunity available to as many students as possible is important even though the creation of so many one-on-one mentoring relationships can be an administrative challenge. Monitoring 60–80 student contracts from conception to completion requires the sustained attention of honors faculty and administrators throughout the term. Particularly when special circumstances (for instance, the inability to conduct field work in exactly the way planned because of funding or scheduling difficulties) arise, students and faculty need guidance and reassurance from the honors program to keep contract projects on track and eligible for credit. Additionally, the comparatively decentralized nature of contracts as part of the honors curriculum means that faculty who may be unfamiliar with honors pedagogy assume responsibility for ensuring that students' contract work meets honors standards.

In order to guide new or inexperienced faculty through the contract process, honors programs and colleges must develop comprehensive guidelines that steer students and faculty toward projects that are sufficiently rigorous to merit honors credit; Bolch describes this process in some detail (54). Once contract projects are designed, the responsibility for gathering data about completed student work and faculty feedback on the mentoring experience rests with the honors program or college. Badenhausen makes a compelling argument against “contract forms that emphasize book-keeping” because they “exacerbate [the] disconnection between contracts and curriculum” (13). He also recognizes the risk of having to ask busy departments to volunteer faculty time for honors. Faced with too many such requests, Badenhausen cautions:

The disciplinary unit may even develop some hostility toward honors [...], for it has most likely already been asked to offer honors sections of introductory courses and now it is being requested to devote limited faculty resources to accommodate honors again in the form of contracts. (14)

The challenges here are first to embed contracts pedagogically within the honors curriculum and then to ensure that faculty and their departments are rewarded and valued for the part they play within that curriculum.

The prospect of working with highly motivated students who want to deepen learning beyond the classroom is an inspiring and rare opportunity for faculty, who may for this reason choose to teach honors courses, serve as thesis/capstone mentors, or support honors in other ways. Nevertheless, the robust participation in contract courses at UNR, which relies upon significant uncompensated faculty participation, demands that equal attention be paid to creating sustainable, rewarding contract experiences for both students and faculty. Because honors contracts involve additional in-depth work within students’ majors, they represent opportunities for students to build upon the foundation of stand-alone honors courses, which, once again, tend to be general education courses at UNR. For example, a physics major in the honors program would enroll in honors sections of the introductory physics sequence. As a

sophomore, junior, or senior, this student could complete one or several honors contracts in progressively more advanced physics courses, perhaps with the same faculty members who taught the introductory courses and likely in conjunction with lab research. Ultimately, this contract work might form the basis of the student's thesis research in physics. In such cases, honors contracts represent a bridge connecting lower- and upper-division honors coursework and support sustained engagement with honors throughout the process of earning a degree. As the students who seek faculty mentorship for their contract projects become active participants in various research and creative activities ongoing in their disciplines, the relationship between the honors program and academic departments is more symbiotic than exploitative, with faculty compensation coming in the forms of additional student engagement, assistance with research activities, and satisfying mentor-mentee relationships.

A streamlined, user-friendly contract process ensures that such enriching experiences are as accessible as possible to both students and faculty. Designing a process that serves both groups equally well is, of course, challenging, and the need for greater honors support for faculty mentoring honors contracts became increasingly apparent over time at UNR. Faculty were expected to assume significant administrative responsibility for contracts, including project design, assessment, and submission, without substantial input from the honors program. Indicators that faculty wanted more contract support included inquiries about whether and how honors projects should be factored into course grades; how projects in unique formats, such as prototypes or videos, should be submitted at the end of the term; and whether the honors program would be willing to accept electronic files and signatures. In essence, the innovative and original contracts that students and faculty were proposing had evolved beyond our traditional, paper-based honors process. The large volume of contract paperwork that flooded the honors program office at the end of each term created a backlog of work for both honors administrators and contract mentors. Those forms and projects returned via campus mail or fax had to be scanned

for our electronic records, while those received by email had to be printed. Inevitably, some forms and projects arrived under separate cover, or did not arrive at all, and had to be pursued. This entire mass of floating documentation then needed to be matched with the original contracts submitted at the beginning of the term and, finally, filed in students' folders. Needless to say, this process was time-consuming and inefficient for students, faculty, and the honors program. Most troublingly of all, honors faculty had the distinct impression that they were spending more time organizing the paperwork associated with contracts than assessing students' work and progress in honors.

UPDATING THE HONORS CONTRACT PROCESS

In order to support the research and creative activities of both students and faculty, the UNR Honors Program needed to redesign, simplify, and automate the contract process. The end-of-term obstacles to contract assessment and archiving, in particular, led to the development of a hybrid contract process that integrates paper and electronic submissions. Simplifying the contract form itself was the first step. Historically, we had used the form for both intake and assessment; it included space for both detailing the proposed project and reporting completion of the contract project and the "final course grade," a phrase that encouraged some faculty to make the mistake of averaging grades for the contract project and the course as a whole, a practice that was obviously unfair to non-honors students in these courses. Although faculty input was essential in developing the project description at the beginning of the semester, this form asked only for a faculty signature to verify contract completion; it did not afford faculty the opportunity to assess students' contract work in relation to honors learning outcomes.

The revised contract form, which still requires a description of the proposed project and the signatures of the student and faculty member, functions solely as a proposal. Students submit this contract proposal to the honors program for approval early in the term, but it is no longer recirculated at the end of the term. (Of course, the program does scan and send contract proposals to both the student

and mentor upon approval to document clear expectations of the project for all concerned.) The new form remains short enough that one designated honors administrator can easily read and approve all contracts and, as necessary, propose adjustments that ensure the project's alignment with honors learning outcomes. As Bolch notes, a single overseer of the contract process can also be a resource to students and faculty unfamiliar with the process (56). This stage of the contract process remains relatively low-tech and labor intensive.

Happily, technology has played a larger role in our reimagined end-of-term submission process. For several years, the honors program had required faculty to submit their students' final contract projects in an effort to avoid some of the issues Bolch describes, particularly that of well-meaning faculty signing off on incomplete projects for fear of negatively affecting students' progress (51). This submission requirement, however, together with the "final course grade" language described above, led to an unintended focus on assigning formal grades to contract projects. At the other extreme, faculty sometimes did not respond to requests from the honors program for project delivery, no doubt as a result of their other end-of-term responsibilities, with the result that honors had to work directly with students to collect projects without the benefit of faculty feedback. We therefore decided to take the most direct approach: we ask students to submit copies of their projects to the honors program while faculty submit assessments of those projects and the work that went into them. Based on faculty preference to scan and submit documents by email instead of campus mail or fax, we decided to move to an electronic submission process for both project and assessment. Not only, we reasoned, would both students and faculty appreciate the convenience of an electronic submission option, but electronic submissions would also reduce the time spent scanning and/or printing projects and forms and the paper involved in that process.

Our next step was to create a qualitative rubric to assess contract outcomes and to distinguish clearly between course grades and faculty evaluation of contract projects. The rubric was designed both to assess student progress on key honors learning outcomes

and to respect faculty's mentorship and time investment. Using a four-point Likert scale (excellent, good, fair, poor), faculty rate the completeness, originality/creativity, risk-taking, critical analysis, and accuracy of each project. (See Table 1.) The completeness and accuracy criteria ensure that faculty have received a professionally finished project and that the project meets expectations described in the contract proposal. The originality/creativity, risk-taking, and critical analysis criteria guide faculty in a more qualitative assessment of project content. Because students who pursue honors contracts, especially those who complete several, tend to do so in preparation for future thesis research, we felt that encouraging original research beyond the established contours of major coursework would support this synergy between contracts and thesis research. Knowing that such work is challenging for students who are not yet experts in their disciplines, the rubric also allows some leeway; for honors credit to be awarded for the course, a project must earn a rating of either excellent or good in four out of five categories. Importantly, the rubric does not include any numbers or make reference to letter grades.

We also simplified the submission process for faculty by using Formstack, an online subscription form builder, to turn the rubric into a clickable electronic form ("About the Company"). Students do not have access to this online form, but both faculty and the honors program encourage them to refer to the rubric as they propose and complete their contracts over the course of the term. Faculty then receive a link to the form in each of three reminder emails, which we start sending on the day before final exams begin each term. We include the whole rubric in the body of each reminder, saving faculty the effort of navigating to our website to review contract guidelines. At the end of the term, this easy email access to the rubric is much more direct than our past process, which asked faculty to download, print, review, and sign each contract and then to mail, fax, or scan/email their approval back to the honors program, with no requirement to include substantive commentary. By asking faculty to engage with the contract rubric at the end of the term, we ensure that they evaluate contracts in relation to the honors

learning outcomes that they were designed to meet. Reviewing the rubric has the added benefit of helping faculty to frame their mentorship activity over the course of the preceding term at a time when they may be working to complete their own self-assessment and performance appraisal documentation.

Just as the Formstack rubric makes evaluating contracts a one-step process for faculty, a companion Formstack form makes submitting projects straightforward for students, who also receive a series of reminder messages from the honors program. The simple student form requests the same basic details about the course and includes a file-upload function. While the student submission form is publicly accessible on the honors program website, we also include a link in both the initial email confirming the approval of the contract and subsequent end-of-term reminders. Because Formstack allows for the data from both forms to be exported to Excel spreadsheets, the maintenance of two separate submission portals does not create the same difficulties as our past practice of accepting multiple mailed/faxed/emailed submissions did. We can now easily cross-reference the two data sets to ensure that each submission finds its match, and we can use the sort function to help in data analysis. For example, we might wish to compare feedback across biology or psychology courses or to determine whether students were more successful in completing projects that required substantial written work or some other kind of deliverable. These data also make it possible to compare courses over time and thus to identify trends in student engagement with their majors. Logistically speaking, because the contracts and supporting syllabi are already archived in electronic form at the end of the term, the only remaining task is to merge separate files (scanned contract and syllabus, student-submitted project, and faculty evaluation). These modifications, once again, ensure that a single honors administrator can supervise the end-of-term processes efficiently.

STUDENT AND FACULTY RESPONSE TO THE UPDATED PROCESS

Students have adapted well to the new process. Notably, all students who completed their contract projects over the three most

TABLE 1. HONORS CONTRACT RUBRIC

| | Completeness | Originality/Creativity | Risk Taking | Critical Analysis | Accuracy |
|------------------|--|---|---|--|---|
| Excellent | Student completed all components of the honors project as set out in the project description. | Student's project is original/creative and demonstrates a clear understanding of scholarship in this discipline. | Student set challenging goals for the honors project and met them fully. | Student's approach to the project demonstrates a high level of skill in critical analysis. | All submitted components of the honors project are free from typographical and other errors and are presented in a professional manner. |
| Good | Student completed all components of the honors project. One component was not as anticipated based on the project description. | Student's project is somewhat original/creative and demonstrates a good understanding of scholarship in this discipline. | Student set challenging goals for the honors project and met them partially. | Student's approach to the project demonstrates some skill in critical analysis. | All submitted components of the honors project are presented in a professional manner. A few minor typographical or other errors are present. |
| Fair | Student did not complete all components of the honors project or two or more components of the project were not as expected. | Student's project lacks originality/creativity but demonstrates some understanding of scholarship in this discipline. | Student set less challenging goals for the honors project but met them fully. | Student's approach to the project demonstrates a low level of skill in critical analysis. | One component of the honors project is presented in a less than professional manner or several serious typographical or other errors are present. |
| Poor | Student did not complete the honors project or submitted a project inconsistent with the project description. | Student's project lacks originality/creativity and does not demonstrate an understanding of scholarship in this discipline. | Student did not set challenging goals for the honors project or failed to meet the goals set for the project. | Student's approach to the project fails to demonstrate skill in critical analysis. | The honors project is not presented in a professional manner. Many serious typographical or other errors are present. |

recent terms submitted copies to the honors program on time. Given that students had previously been quite willing to supply copies of projects when asked, this result is perhaps unsurprising. The data on the rate and timeliness of faculty feedback submission, however, are more interesting. Faculty response data for five recent terms, three of which (fall 2017, spring 2018, and fall 2018) employed the new contract process, clearly demonstrate its impact. (See Table 2.)

The data show a significant decline in the number of contracts left outstanding at the final grade deadline with the new process, which began in fall 2017. This result is positive for two reasons. First, the honors program is now able to inform students of the outcomes of their contracts within a few days of final grade submission. Second, we can begin work on adding honors designations to students' transcripts, a process that requires several weeks at UNR, in a far timelier fashion. Interestingly, however, the data do not reveal a clear pattern of faculty response rates following the first, second, and third email reminders from the honors program. While it is possible that individual faculty members simply adhere to idiosyncratic timelines in completing their end-of-term tasks, the variability in response rates might also reflect the final exam schedule, differences in teaching loads between terms, or even other factors such as fatigue or anticipation of the coming summer or winter breaks. Whether faculty submit their feedback following the first, second, or third, reminder, though, the data suggest that the convenience of the electronic rubric clearly increases the overall on-time response rate.

**TABLE 2. FACULTY RESPONSE RATE ON CONTRACT PROJECTS,
FALL 2016–FALL 2018**

| Term | 1st Email Reminder | 2nd Email Reminder | 3rd Email Reminder | Total by Deadline | Outstanding at Deadline |
|------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| FA16 | 18 (28.6%) | 16 (25.4%) | 22 (34.9%) | 56 (88.9%) | 7 (11.1%) |
| SP17 | 14 (19.4%) | 20 (27.8%) | 11 (15.3%) | 45 (62.5%) | 27 (37.5%) |
| FA17 | 27 (43.5%) | 26 (41.9%) | 8 (12.9%) | 61 (98.3%) | 1 (1.7%) |
| SP18 | 17 (27.4%) | 25 (40.3%) | 19 (30.6%) | 61 (98.3%) | 1 (1.7%) |
| FA18 | 22 (34.4%) | 33 (51.6%) | 7 (10.9%) | 63 (96.9%) | 2 (3.1%) |

While the electronic project submission form and qualitative rubric have considerably simplified the contract process in its first year-and-a-half, the transition has not been seamless. Students and faculty who had completed or mentored contracts under the former process needed a little bit of coaching in moving through the new steps, and both groups helped to identify aspects of the new process that needed clarification. The most significant problems became apparent with the first round of project submissions by students. Students generally had little difficulty submitting projects using the electronic form; because of unclear language in the initial email reminders to students, however, they sometimes did not realize that their submissions reached only the honors program and not their respective faculty mentors. We updated the contract guidelines and clarified in the initial confirmation email to students their responsibility for transmitting projects to faculty, modifications that vastly improved the student submission process in spring 2018 and fall 2018. Several other minor logistical issues also arose in the first cycle. For instance, a few students and faculty had downloaded and saved the old contract form; not wanting to create duplicative work for either group, we granted one-time permission to submit either proposals or feedback using the outdated form.

While most of the feedback we have received from faculty has related to student work, we have also received a few comments on the process and requests for clarification. Of the 61 faculty members who submitted feedback at the end of the fall 2017 term, only four offered feedback on the contract process or sought guidance.² Two faculty members were unsure how to complete the form for students who did not finish proposed projects. This confusion may have arisen from the language explaining the form in the three reminder messages. Since we have revised this language for clarity, however, we have received no further questions about this issue. A third faculty member took issue with the deadline for student submission of the contract project, suggesting that the honors program had no authority to set due dates for non-honors classes. Because we do not wish to impinge upon faculty autonomy, the due date for contract projects is always our university's pre-finals preparation

day, or the day after regular class meetings end. Finally, one particularly technologically savvy faculty member suggested that every field except the rubric itself should self-populate to make the feedback process even more efficient for faculty. Such functionality is indeed desirable and may be a path we will pursue in the future.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE REDESIGNED CONTRACT PROCESS

Honors contracts rely heavily on the expertise of faculty to determine whether a given project ultimately merits honors credit. Because faculty receive no monetary compensation for mentoring contracts at UNR, we needed to create an efficient, user-friendly mechanism for gathering faculty feedback; the updated contract process is just such a mechanism. Under the former contract process, the request that faculty submit graded copies of student work prompted some faculty to provide in-depth feedback, but because we were not doing enough to facilitate feedback, most faculty interpreted the requirement for a “final grade” on the contract to mean simply a letter grade evaluating the project. While such grades can shape the contract process by evaluating the overall quality of the final product, they often do not capture or explain the pedagogical value of the contract experience. The new qualitative rubric shifts the focus away from numbers and toward specified learning outcomes like critical thinking and risk-taking. Even with minimal faculty engagement (that is, simply clicking through the rubric), this process significantly improves the quality of faculty feedback by tying the experience specifically to honors learning outcomes. The rubric also has led more faculty to complete, often in detail, an optional field for written comments.

Crucially, such comments may include information that the honors staff would be unlikely to learn through interactions with the students themselves. For example, one faculty member who supervised a spring 2018 contract indicated that the student’s work had been so successful that she had decided to offer him a position in her research lab, where he is currently completing a series

of experiments that have laid the groundwork for his honors senior thesis. While research activity would certainly have come up in this student's next advising appointment, the contract feedback focuses the conversation immediately on specifics. Of course, the more information an advisor has, the more productive the discussion is likely to be, and our modified contract process has positively affected advising. The kind of in-depth feedback we now routinely receive on contracts has the capacity both to enhance our work with students and to strengthen our relationships with faculty.

This new, more extensive faculty feedback is often surprisingly candid. While we certainly want students to engage with the qualitative rubric as they prepare their contract projects, they do not have access to the specific feedback their instructors provide to us via the online rubric. Individual faculty members may choose to share their evaluations with students, and many faculty members continue to offer additional feedback to students. Of course, the confidentiality of any information communicated to the honors program is both important to faculty members and useful to the honors program. In fall 2018, for example, three students opted to complete contract projects for a biochemistry course on the topic of metabolic regulation. The assignment developed by the instructor asked "students to take the fundamental knowledge gained from the class and apply it to a real-world problem in the form of a review paper." Feedback on the three completed papers ranged from praise for a "wonderfully written review of a topic related to, but outside the scope of, our class curriculum" (five excellent ratings) to acknowledgment of a solid paper containing "a number of typos and other minor errors" (three good and two excellent ratings) to acceptance of a "decent paper worthy of receiving honors credit" (four good ratings and one fair rating).

Owing to the individualized nature of honors contracts, even in cases such as this one where several students have completed comparable work, there is little pedagogical value in quantifying students' success relative to peers. Such information is better used to inform the individual mentoring delivered via honors teaching and advising. With reference to these three student papers, for

instance, the first student's next honors advising session might point to this successful research as an indicator that the student should consider pursuing graduate study in biochemistry; the second student's session might emphasize professionalism in research activity and highlight resources within and outside of honors, like the writing center, that could improve the student's performance; finally, the third student would benefit from a discussion of how progress toward proficiency in scientific research requires deep engagement with primary sources.

UNR's midsize honors program can provide such individualized advising for a majority of our students each term. These one-on-one meetings typically involve discussion of contract projects and courses. Smaller honors programs and colleges that process fewer contracts each term might wish to solicit even more detailed feedback than we do at UNR and to take a more hands-on approach to presenting such feedback to students; end-of-term meetings to discuss contract courses and projects alongside proposed learning outcomes would be one possibility. Although large honors programs and colleges might not have the administrative capacity to apply this feedback to individual student cases via advising or teaching, an automated process for collecting these data is nevertheless useful for assessing the interactions among students, faculty, and honors operations.

CONCLUSION

Although the assessment and management of contract courses are challenging for both honors administrators and the faculty members who teach them, such courses are an important part of an honors curriculum seeking to preserve broad access amidst growing demand for honors education. At UNR, contracts constitute a vitally important component of the honors curriculum: they allow students to maintain consistent involvement with the honors program throughout their undergraduate careers. A readily available contract option ensures that students who need more than general education coursework from honors are not disadvantaged; rather, they can expand their honors experience to the broader range of

courses associated with their majors. With the automation of the assessment portion of our process, students have gained additional agency in the process by assuming the responsibility for submitting their completed contract projects to their faculty instructors and the honors program; faculty are able to submit their feedback quickly and easily; and a single honors administrator is able to oversee the process from beginning to end.

Whether UNR honors students record instructional videos, write critical essays, or conduct specialized experiments, the reimagined contract process allows the honors program to keep track of them all in a way that is minimally demanding of faculty members' time. Although we may not be able to provide monetary compensation or count work on honors contracts as part of teaching loads, we have streamlined the administrative tasks associated with contracts so that faculty can invest their time and energy in the part of the process where they can make the greatest positive impact on students: providing the individualized mentorship that is a hallmark of the honors contract experience. Significantly, as a result of the changes made to the contract process, honors faculty and administrators are better informed about students' work in contract courses outside of the stand-alone honors curriculum and, consequently, better equipped to apply their enhanced knowledge of student performance in ways that help students to make progress as scholars in both the honors program and their majors.

NOTES

¹Figures for students and courses are not unduplicated. That is, in some of the 618 courses, multiple honors students completed individual contracts. Once again, this occurrence was most frequent in STEM courses common to several majors.

²Of the 61 faculty members who submitted feedback at the end of spring 2018, none contacted the honors program regarding the process, possibly because the procedural feedback received following fall 2017 had already improved the process. Queries at the end of fall 2018 were most often about submitting feedback for multiple

students in the same course who may have worked together on a contract project.

[The UNR Honors Program became an honors college in July 2020.]

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