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Honors Flourishing in the Midst of Change

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Abstract: In the wake of formidable institutional change, and in response to administrative concerns about honors' place within the university, authors describe the development of a pilot course that led to a program's critical self-study and course transformations that were long overdue. Citizen Scholarship and Human Flourishing incorporates specific practices such as peer instruction and "ungrading" to align with new institutional learning objectives and broadly defined undergraduate research experiences across disciplines. The experimental course presents honors as a model for progressive curricular change in the midst of shifting administrative landscapes.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; ungrading; change management; curriculum planning; University of Maine (ME)—Honors College

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Change tends to happen slowly in Maine. Our landscape is granite; it's hard to move. Yet since 2018 the University of Maine has experienced a fast and formidable regime change amid the turbulent global pandemic.

In July 2018 UMaine President Joan Ferrini-Mundy began her tenure with the bold goal of converting our Research 2 university to a Research 1. She hired an interim executive vice president for academic affairs and provost in summer 2019, a full-time executive vice president for academic affairs and provost in summer 2020, an associate provost for student success and strategic initiatives in spring 2021, an associate provost for academic affairs and faculty development in spring 2021, and four new academic deans in summer 2021. There had been talk of perhaps moving the honors college under the auspices of the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences; fortunately, we were able

to maintain our autonomy as a college, and our dynamic Dean of the Honors College, Ellen Weinauer, was one of the four new deans hired.

Changes in administration did, however, entail renewed scrutiny of our internal decision-making practices in honors, of our governance and institutional connections, and of the curriculum itself. In honors, broader “regime change” catalyzed a period of renewed self-reflection and change that was long overdue. Some of our initial steps involved codifying and clarifying practices that had previously existed only as norms and social conventions. Particularly during periods of transition, one may realize that informality complicates ease of transition or that “the way we’ve always done it” is deserving of renewed consideration.

There was a certain urgency in our considerations of curricular reform to re-establish the integrity of our honors identity, focusing on greater consistency in learning outcomes as well as more intentional “scaffolding” of the intellectual skills that students would need across our four-year curriculum. Prior attempts to initiate this important but challenging work had fizzled. However, with support from the new honors administration and fresh key decision makers elsewhere in the university, that work has begun in earnest. One team of faculty members is focusing on immediate changes that can be taken toward achieving these goals in the context of the existing curriculum. Meanwhile, another group of honors faculty is re-envisioning the curriculum from the ground up. This redesign team is beginning with the knowledge, skills, habits of mind, and ethical values that they hope the ideal honors graduate will possess. Working backward from this ideal graduate, they are envisaging the curriculum, learning outcomes, and pedagogical practices necessary to cultivate and empower such an honors graduate in a changed university landscape.

An opportunity that particularly facilitated our curricular reform was President Ferrini-Mundy’s expansion of the University of Maine System’s Research and Development Plan FY20–FY24 to include her own “Strategic Vision and Values.” One of the central strategies she proposed was the development of “Research Learning Experiences” (RLE) for first- and second-year students, introducing them to real research and/or professional practices early in their college careers. In the fall of 2020, the Harold Alfond Foundation made an astonishing \$240 million commitment to the University of Maine System to support “transformative change,” and President Ferrini-Mundy allocated a portion of those Alfond funds toward the development of RLEs.

In honors we embraced the RLE Initiative as a way for our college to flourish in an era of rapid regime change. At the core of the RLE mission is a scholarly exploratory process during which students identify open-ended questions for further inquiry and develop problem-solving skills that help them overcome obstacles in their consideration of various answers. RLE goals aligned well with the mission of our honors college, which includes fostering undergraduate research in the form of honors theses and other research opportunities. Furthermore, the RLE Initiative, especially its focus on the first two years of undergraduate education, offered a chance for us to rethink our honors curriculum's initial four-semester sequential investigation into important texts across cultures. Students in our current curriculum often report feeling that there is an awkward gap between their first two years of study and the thesis phase. Some students feel unprepared when, after studying classical texts, they then need to find a research question and an advisor in disciplinary areas that may be far afield from the classics.

However, we recognized as honors faculty that our curricular approach to the classical texts in our current curriculum overlapped with goals of the RLE Initiative in interesting ways. The RLE guidelines suggested that students should cultivate a scholarly, exploratory mindset and develop progressive, integral research skills. We have always encouraged honors students to develop their own interpretations of classical texts at the roots of different cultures, such as Plato's *Republic*, Kongzi's *Analects*, *Dao De Jing*, and Native American traditional myths and legends. We have also guided students to explore historical ideas derived from the texts, drawing connections to their lived experiences through critical thinking and reflection. We have discussed our collective interpretations and discoveries in discussion-based seminars and through students' argumentative essays.

Responding to the new regime's RLE Initiative by building on and re-envisioning honors curricular practices, four honors faculty members from four disciplines—history, philosophy, psychology, and political science—proposed an RLE version of the first-year honors seminars: Citizen Scholars and Human Flourishing (*Flourish-RLE* hereafter). We received \$27,000 from the Associate Provost in support of our proposal, a significant portion of which has funded Honors Peer Instructors to assist the faculty in designing and teaching the two-semester *Flourish-RLE* seminar series. The principal aim of *Flourish-RLE* is to develop students' research skills with particular focus on a few core texts across history and incorporating diverse approaches inspired by the RLE goals and our valued honors practices.

In the first semester of *Flourish-RLE*, we drilled down into the exploration of the self and interpersonal relationships. The scholarly exploration in this semester consisted of three major modules. First, we read and discussed some foundational texts across cultures and investigated how they shaped various understandings of the self and a sense of belonging to a community. Second, we spent a weekend engaging in outdoor adventure and self-exploration. Via group activities including kayaking, paddle boarding, hiking, and ropes courses, we got to know ourselves and each other better and generated a genuine sense of community. Eventually, each student developed a research question that was meaningful to them and that they were willing to explore further.

We are currently midway through the second semester of *Flourish-RLE*, in which students choose one of multiple pathways to apply their knowledge and develop their research skills. Some students are exploring the arts and their role in defining a community; some are engaging directly with their communities through applied research; some are examining challenging philosophical questions; some are using their knowledge and skills to engage in leadership activities. In the second semester of *Flourish-RLE*, we are also introducing students to the rich research resources on campus, familiarizing them with the university library and helping them reach out to potential mentors and advisors. This second semester will end with a research symposium where students will present their scholarly exploration to a broader honors audience and to each other.

One of the central goals of *Flourish-RLE* has been to help students take greater ownership of their own development and inquiry. This goal seemed particularly meaningful in the context of the global COVID pandemic, during which college students have often felt anxious, depressed, and powerless (e.g., Chang et al., 2021). Without the kinds of connections fostered by in-person classrooms, building intrinsic motivation to learn became increasingly difficult, even and perhaps especially among honors students (Das et al., 2021; Wiltse et al., 2020). To help students feel empowered in their scholarly exploration, we adopted a fairly radical *ungrading* approach in *Flourish-RLE* (see Blum, 2020). In some ways, our approach to *ungrading* reduced student anxiety and allowed them to forge their own path and identity as students. In other ways, it created new anxieties for them to learn to navigate.

In an *ungraded* class, students are given extensive qualitative feedback but are not assigned quantitative grades on their work throughout the semester. In this implementation, students completed a goal-setting assignment early in

the semester as well as a mid-term and final self-evaluation of their progress toward these goals. At the end of the term, students met one-on-one with their instructors and collaboratively decided on a final letter grade to reflect the student's growth across the semester with respect to their individually identified goals.

A shift to *ungrading* helped disrupt anxiogenic patterns in uncertain times. In our first class, we asked students what they saw as the connection between their grades and their learning, and how grades or the pursuit of them helped them learn to learn. What followed was a long discussion of frustrations, stressors, and inequities that encapsulated the consequences of entirely extrinsic measures of success (see Rapchak, Hands, & Hensley, 2023). When we then explained that we would not be using that system and instead that students would chart their own growth, making an argument for their success with evidence from their work in the class, there was a palpable sense of relief in the room along with some excitement and confusion. Students said they felt liberated by the lack of grades but also a bit unmoored. Grades had served as the foundation for their self-concept as successful students. Without these metrics, they explained that they were not sure how to identify their goals or to chart their progress toward them. Although anxiety about their final grade in the course and its implications for their imagined futures waned, a different kind of anxiety—one that appeared more generative and less paralyzing—emerged. This anxiety about how to go about setting and achieving goals resulted in our working together to practice those skills and make space for intrinsic motivation to develop.

In turn, our honors community has “flourished” with respect to curriculum development in the midst of formidable regime change and concomitant new initiatives, solidifying our value and contributions as an autonomous college. Sudden shifts in leadership have called for speedy adaptations that have allowed us to make long overdue revisions to our honors curriculum in experimental and innovative ways that have given us renewed energy and opportunity to move forward. Though we Mainers can sometimes be like granite, averse to change, in honors we tried to remain open in transformative times, and in doing so we have reaped the benefits of fresh strategies in honors learning, research, and growth.

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