

Final Report:

From Students to Scholars: Building Academic Research Skills in the Honors Programs

Original Goal Statement

The Honors Program at John Jay College seeks to develop a scaffolded set of skills-building exercises, assignments, and instructional materials for implementation throughout our curriculum designed to promote the formation of our students as independent academic scholars.

Description of Work Completed

On January 31st, 2017, we conducted a 2.5-hour long (unfunded) “teaching summit” to discuss strengths and needs among honors students as they complete their capstone work. Attending this summit were 15 “honors faculty,” that is, faculty that are teaching at least one honors course this year. This work identified several skill sets related to academic research, reading, and writing as crucial for successful completion of capstone work but often lacking among honors students as they begin their senior year. The goals for this Program Improvement Grant were thus to assemble a small team of faculty to develop adaptable assignments for various honors courses at the 200- and 300-level that would help students develop these important skills and serve as “warm ups” to doing capstone work at the 400-level. To that end, four faculty members (Profs. Olivera Jokic, English; Nathan Lents, Sciences; Fritz Umbach, History; and Valerie West, Criminal Justice) formed the “honors capstone working group” and set to work designing these assignments through the spring of 2017. These assignments were then introduced at another honors faculty development event, funded by this P.I.G., on May 24th, 2017, and we received a great deal of useful feedback for revising the assignments. The assignments were revised and finalized by the working group in fall of 2017.

Description of Funds Used

At the suggestion of the TLC director, we altered our original plan of giving small stipends to 12 faculty members and instead awarded the majority of the funds as \$600 stipends to the members of the faculty working group (with the exception of Lents), with the remainder of the budget used to purchase a premium lunch for XX faculty members at the May faculty development event at a total cost of \$XXX.

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Deliverables

The assignments created by the working group (then revised with input from all participating honors faculty) are as follows: 8 (eight) common assignments were created for Hon-401 and were

shared with all honors faculty so that they could see the skills and knowledge goals we have for capstone work. Those are appended below as **Appendix A**. Following this, and largely based on the guided work expected of students for the Hon-401 course, we also developed 5 (five) common assignments to share with the Hon-301 instructors. (Many of these assignments are provided in different “flavors” that demonstrate different context-dependent variations on the themes of the assignments. This is crucial because Hon-301, unlike Hon-401, takes different shapes under the leadership of different instructors since the learning goals of the course are linked to methodological understandings, not conceptual knowledge.) These assignments are listed below as **Appendix B**.

Future Work Planned

Our ambitious goals require a multi-year approach. Continuing this theme, we plan to craft similar “prep work” assignments for 200-level honors, which will lay an even more basic foundation for academic reading and writing. Lents piloted several vertically building assignments in his 200-level MHC course in fall 2017 involving both engagement with the primary literature (reading and analysis) and the effective marshaling of published evidence to advance an argument (academic writing). These assignments await further refinement and generalization to the context of other 200-level courses such as Hon201, Hon202, and MHC226, a task scheduled for spring of 2018 for deployment at a faculty development event in May of 2018. Together, these three layers of common, scaffolded, skills-building assignments will develop the academic research, reading, and writing skills of our honors students and enhance the depth and quality of their capstone work.

Assessment

Because spring 2018 will be the first deployment of the newly developed materials, we do not yet have assessment data to share. However, we have in place an elaborate assessment plan which will measure, as much as is possible, overall quality and rigor with regard to capstone work in honors and final papers and projects in the 300-level course.

Dissemination and Connection to Other Efforts

Two members of this working group are also members of a college-wide effort on capstone projects (Lents and Philip) and several members will be facilitating a discussion on capstones at the college faculty development day on January 25th, 2018. Both of those efforts have been inspired and informed by, and effectively synergize with, the capstone improvement efforts described here. Indeed, the work here is no way uniquely applicable to the honors context and thus our goal is to disseminate the important lessons to all corners of the college.

Appendix A: Common Assignments Developed for Hon401

1. Literature Searching. The literature searching assignment should be due on the first day of class, since students will have been working on the capstone for many months now.

<https://jjhonorsprogram.commons.gc.cuny.edu/teaching-of-writing/handouts/181-2/>

2. Claim/Evidence/Warrant. This assignment teaches and requires the use of claim/evidence/warrant; once taught, we can use that vocabulary both as requirements in an assignment and in our feedback on assignments.

<https://jjhonorsprogram.commons.gc.cuny.edu/teaching-of-writing/introduction-to-claim-evidence-warrant/>

Here's some language that we often use in writing assignments that references/reinforces/requires what the students have learned in the cl/ev/wa introduction:

A. When using direct quotations, be sure to use [method 3 or 4](#) for introducing quotations (-5% if you don't) and also be sure to reduce your quotations to ten for fewer words. See [here](#) on how to reduce quotations.

B. When making your arguments, be sure to ground those arguments in specific evidence.

C. Be sure in those paragraphs where you make points from evidence to organize those paragraph in the familiar cl/ev/wa format and that you put a (CL) in front of your paragraph's claim, an (EV) before the evidence, and a (WA) in front of the warrant. (Keep in mind (A) not all paragraphs should be in cl/ev/wa format—just those that make a point from evidence. Also keep in mind (B) that the cl/ev/wa format is for organizing individual paragraphs rather than for organizing whole papers. A strong paper will likely have a series of cl/ev/wa paragraphs as well as a number of paragraphs that are *not* in that format.)

3. Sound Methodology Assignment. This is the shared methodology assignment using the "holla back" video, found here, but you will likely want to just cut and paste to your own blackboard site:

http://jjcweb.jjay.cuny.edu/history/honors_capstone_2017/hw2.html

4. "Asked and Answered." This assignment is to seek and find 3 (or 5) questions "asked and answered" in a given field. This one is pretty darn important and pretty darn helpful. We've seen that this helps a great deal in understanding how students approach their understanding of the literature and sets them up very well for the next two assignments.

<https://jihonorsprogram.commons.gc.cuny.edu/teaching-of-writing/five-questions-answered-on-your-topic/>

5. Value Added. All students should also complete a “value added” assessment of their project, discussing a few key pieces of prior research as *close as possible* to their own research/argument and what the “value added” of their capstone will be. There is no set format for this, but it is often key to see how students see their own work fitting within the body of other work in their field. This will undoubtedly reveal some “gaps” in their knowledge of the field in time for them to fill those gaps in their final literature review.

6. Responsible Use of Evidence. The important feature of this assignment is the requirement that students provide screenshots that capture the page from which they are quoting directly or indirectly. We found that for some students, extracting meaning from academic texts is challenging and they unwittingly misrepresent their sources. We urge you to require your students to provide these screenshots for every direct and indirect quotation in their final capstone, so this assignment both introduces that idea to the students and explains why it’s so important to use evidence responsibly. By having them practice this with you before the final written capstone is complete, you will likely find that students are much more careful in their use of sources in their final capstones.

http://jicweb.jjay.cuny.edu/history/honors_capstone_2017/hw5.html

7. Outline. In this assignment, students lay out both the structure of their capstone and detail specifically the evidence they have for each of their points. In this version of the assignment, they do so as a claim/evidence/warrant outline, which we recommend:

http://jicweb.jjay.cuny.edu/history/honors_capstone_2017/hw7.html

8. Peer Review. We urge you to use in-class peer review on as many assignments as possible, but definitely on the section-drafts of the capstone. Having a system where students sign-off on assignments also works, in which the peer reviewer risks losing some points if they miss rather glaring oversights, but at the very least, they are graded on the quality of their review, though we recommend very low stakes so as to not induce needless stress.

Appendix A: Common Assignments Developed for Hon301

I. This assignment addresses how "knowledge" gets constructed from quantitative reasoning--and just how subjective that seemingly objective process can be. Here are two such assignments:

A) Looking at two expert witness reports from the recent groundbreaking court decisions about stop-question-frisk. <https://epistemology2017.commons.gc.cuny.edu/syllabus/hw-6/>

B) A longer assignment that looks at three different media reports on the same piece of quant-heavy social science research: <https://epistemology2017.commons.gc.cuny.edu/syllabus/november-extra-credit/>

II. This assignment that has them "show their work" with the library finding aids. Here are two versions of this assignment, one with a given research question and one with a topic of their choosing:

A. <https://epistemology2017.commons.gc.cuny.edu/syllabus/hw9/>

B. <https://epistemology2017.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2017/11/20/hw-10/>

III. Absolutely essential is an assignment that introduces Claim Evidence Warrant (this is now the shared vocabulary the program has settled on for evidence-based writing).

<https://epistemology2017.commons.gc.cuny.edu/syllabus/hw2-pt-1/>

IV. This assignment distinguishes between primary and secondary sources.

<https://epistemology2017.commons.gc.cuny.edu/syllabus/hw-5/>

Following this, here is a more in-depth version with unfamiliar vocabulary linked and edited author for clarity): <https://epistemology2017.commons.gc.cuny.edu/readings/fredrickson-reading/>

And here are some hints to help with that reading:

<https://epistemology2017.commons.gc.cuny.edu/readings/fredrickson-reading/fredrickson-reading-hints/>

V. We strongly recommend that Hon301 include a quiz on the "honors capstone research guide" and the contents of the embedded videos. This will help them with the basics of library/literature searching while also ensuring that they are familiar with capstone requirements well before they begin.