

# HONORS CAPSTONE PROJECT

## FACULTY HANDBOOK

**RADFORD**  
UNIVERSITY

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Honors College

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## Overview

The honors capstone project is the culminating educational experience for students in the Radford University Honors College. To graduate from the Honors College students must complete and publicly present the outcomes of a scholarly project, which has been supervised by a faculty member in that student's major. The content and product of honors capstone projects varies *dramatically* across disciplines. With that variability in mind, all honors capstone projects should represent independent scholarship appropriate for the student's discipline, and include some form of written self-critique of the work. Ultimately honors capstone projects are learning experiences; the process of proposing and executing a project is typically more valuable than any product derived from the work.

Honors capstone projects require a brief written proposal (~2-pages) and approval forms completed **two full semesters** prior to graduation. That is, for a spring graduation the proposal must be completed before the previous fall semester begins. Like independent study credits, the honors capstone project counts as a course in the major (3 credits of departmental course number 488). Although the Honors College facilitates honors capstone projects, departments are ultimately responsible for setting the disciplinary standards for an honors-level project of this nature. Faculty mentors are responsible for evaluating a student's progress toward those standards and helping the student meet those goals. Completion of the project is formally indicated through the grade assigned by the faculty mentor.

## Eligibility to Mentor an Honors Capstone Project

Consistent with the expectations for graduate faculty, the preferred honors capstone mentor has a terminal degree for their discipline and experience with scholarly/creative activities. In addition, mentors should be tenured or tenure-track (or at least full-time). Tenured and tenure-track faculty typically have student mentorship prescribed in their job description, whereas adjunct faculty are only being paid-per-course.

Faculty mentors **must** be eligible to teach courses in the student's major and serve as instructor-of-record for the student's capstone credits. This requirement usually means that the faculty mentor is from the same department as the student's major. However, interdisciplinary fields can provide exceptions at the discretion of the department chair (e.g., a Criminal Justice professor eligible to teach in Political Science; a Biology professor eligible to teach in Anthropological Sciences).

### *Co-Mentorship*

Although multiple faculty mentors are not typical for honors capstone projects, co-mentorship is welcome when needed or desired. Students with double-majors or a strong interdisciplinary focus might wish to receive mentorship from faculty in different departments. A student who has developed a strong, informal mentorship relationship with an adjunct faculty would need to receive co-mentorship from a full-time member of the department. Students and potential faculty mentors are encouraged to develop co-mentorship plans in conjunction with the Honors College director and relevant department chairs.

## Content of the Honors Capstone Project

### *Content Requirements*

The honors capstone project might be a thesis, a creative work, technical report, or an empirical research project as appropriate for the student's major. The goal of the honors capstone is to demonstrate increasingly independent ***scholarship*** in the student's discipline(s). The Honors College defines "scholarship" as the ***integration of a new idea, perspective, or approach into the existing body of knowledge*** for a discipline or disciplines. This "new idea" could take many forms, such as a thesis statement, a scientific hypothesis, a novel application, or a creative vision. This "new idea" need not be completely original nor novel in the strictest sense of the word. Indeed, 99% of all scholarship is directly built upon past work. As such, the honors capstone will often simply provide a fresh perspective or novel approach to previously explored issues in a field. For example, even a direct replication of a past experiment with a new sample could shed new light on an established phenomenon.

Student activities such as internships, student teaching, and study abroad do ***not*** meet our definition of scholarship in one's discipline in-and-of themselves. Therefore, these activities alone cannot constitute one's honors capstone, even though they often constitute essential educational experiences. However, such settings could provide opportunities for work that is not available on campus and which might contribute substantially to one's capstone project.

### *Faculty-Student Partnership in the Proposed Project*

The best honors capstone projects represent *partnerships* between an engaged faculty mentor and an intellectually-motivated honors student. When these partnerships become one-sided, the projects ultimately have less value for the student. Exclusively *student-*

driven projects with little faculty oversight often lack rigor and appropriate integration into a field. Exclusively *faculty*-driven projects with little student input potentially lack the motivational spark that drives students toward success. The final balance of faculty vs. student inputs for the capstone is ultimately a judgment call that will vary across mentors and students.

Experience with formulating scholarly questions varies dramatically across students. Whereas some students have been involved with mentored creative or scientific work since freshman year, other students come to the honors capstone as their first-and-only scholarly project. Given this variability in student experience, some students will approach potential faculty mentors with well-formulated ideas. Other students might report not having any ideas at all. We ask that faculty “meet students where they are” with both openness and constructive feedback.

### *Faculty Responsibilities for the Proposed Project*

Department faculty collectively determine what constitutes an appropriate honors capstone project in their discipline for their majors. In turn, the faculty mentors are the arbiters of whether an individual student’s project meets those standards. With departmental expectations in mind, capstone mentors should consider whether a proposed project is:

- Sufficiently rigorous
- *Not* unreasonably ambitious in terms of time and resources
- Appropriate for the discipline
- Within the realm of the faculty’s ability to mentor

We ask that faculty use their good judgment by helping students propose a project with the promise of genuine collaboration between both partners in the mentorship dyad. This partnership should result in a project that addresses a feasible scholarly

question, is appropriate for the discipline, and is within the ability of the mentor to supervise. New faculty are encouraged to consult with both experienced departmental faculty and an Honors College administrator.

Helping a student propose a strong honors capstone project takes time and discussion. Faculty will typically need to meet with students several times during the proposal-writing process and, depending on the student's experience, suggest new directions and readings to move the process forward. Even the best honors students with well-formulated ideas will need their proposal edited for both writing and content. And although students have a responsibility to take a lead role on their project, many of them will need constructive feedback from faculty on a full range of issues (e.g, theory, methodology, ethical constraints, writing, time management, professionalism).



## Execution of the Honors Capstone Project

### *Timeline*

Consistent with the expectations of other student-initiated scholarly work (e.g., graduate theses and dissertations), the honors capstone projects should be executed over the course of multiple semesters. Most students submit their honors capstone proposals by the beginning of the fall semester and present the outcomes of their work at end of the spring semester. Winter graduates can reverse this timeline by starting work in the spring semester (or in very rare situations a student might work intensively over the summer for completion prior to a winter graduation).

The vast majority of students complete the honors capstone projects senior year, but earlier timelines are acceptable. For example, education majors typically complete their honors capstones junior year because senior year is devoted to blocking and student teaching.

### *Approval Forms*

Two forms are required to complete an honors capstone project, both of which are available to students in the Honors College office and on the “Honors Communications” D2L page.

*Honors College Capstone Proposal Form.* The first form is submitted to the Honors College and documents the student’s intent to complete this step of the honors curriculum. The completed form, the written capstone proposal, and the necessary approval signatures (student, faculty mentor, and department chair) are due in the Honors College by drop/add **two semesters** prior to the student’s graduation. Typically this means submission by drop/add in the fall semester for spring graduates and submission by drop/add in the spring semester for winter graduates.

*Registrar Capstone Registration Form.* The second form is submitted to the Registrar and enrolls the student for three credits of 488 in their major. The completed form, the written capstone proposal, and the necessary approval signatures (student, faculty mentor, department chair, and Honors College director) are due to the Registrar by drop/add of the semester the student wants to enroll in the 488 credits. Because this is a multi-semester project, students can enroll in the 488 credits during either semester. Students must have the 488 credits on their transcript to graduate from the Honors College.

If the student takes the 488 credits during the first semester of the project, faculty will need to assign a grade prior to the completion. The Honors College recommends that the faculty assign ON (indicating an “ongoing course”) or I (incomplete). Following completion of the project, faculty must then assign a final letter grade (A-F) through the Registrar’s office prior to the student’s graduation.

### *Faculty Responsibilities for Project Execution*

Faculty mentors have different supervision styles that range from tightly-controlled to laissez-faire. Regardless of one’s approach, faculty mentors are requested to clearly articulate their expectations to students at the beginning of the project. Given that students vary in their experience working on independent projects, faculty should be prepared to set clearly communicated expectations for:

- Frequency, duration, and logistics of progress meetings
- Planning and review of capstone products (e.g., IRB/IACUC submission, project presentation)
- Steps and standards for achieving honors-level work as deemed appropriate by the student’s department

Despite the generally high level of conscientiousness among Honors College seniors, some students might not meet faculty standards for how the project is being executed. Such frustrations are much less likely when expectations from faculty are clear and communication is strong. ***Therefore we strongly encourage faculty to articulate their project standards upfront and then maintain communication via a student-driven progress meeting at least every other week.***

## Products of the Honors Capstone Project

### *Public Presentation*

All Honors College graduates are required to present their honors capstone projects publicly. Presentations can take the form of a poster presentation, podium presentation, or performance “talk back” depending on the typical format for the discipline. The key features should include:

- Project goals
- Thesis, hypothesis, creative vision
- Methodological or creative approach
- Outcomes (e.g., results, evidence, creative product)
- Opportunity for audience questions

Although the vast majority of students present their projects at on-campus events like the Radford University Student Engagement Forum, this particular venue is not in any way a requirement. Students are strongly encouraged to present their projects at off-campus conferences when deemed appropriate by their faculty mentor. Presentations at state, regional, and national honors conferences are also welcome outcomes. Funding from the Honors College is often available for students presenting their capstones at an honors conference (see section on Support for Honors Capstone Projects).

In the very unusual situation that the student cannot present their work at an on-campus or off-campus conference, alternatives can be arranged with approval of the Honors College director. For example, an alternative option might be a publicly announced presentation within the student’s department. Regardless of the final presentation location, ***all presentations must be made prior to the awarding of the student’s degree***, which can be as soon as two weeks after the university’s graduation ceremonies.

### *Written Reflective Critique*

Although not all capstone projects will result in a complete honors thesis, all students are required to submit a written reflective critique of their work. The length and scope of this critique is at the discretion of the faculty mentor and home department. Students who write a full thesis or research report of their work would typically have this critique housed within that document. In the sciences, such a critique would be exemplified by the discussion section of a research report. Humanities majors who write an honors thesis might have such reflective components housed in their conclusion section. Regardless of whether the reflective critique is part of a larger document, students should provide an honest assessment of the strengths, limitations, and context of the project within the existing scholarly literature of the field. The written reflective critique (or the larger thesis/report) will be archived through processes approved by McConnell Library.

## **Support for Honors Capstone Projects**

### *Guidance and Troubleshooting*

The Honors College director and associate director are always available to meet with students, faculty mentors, or both. These meetings can be especially useful for faculty new to mentoring student projects. Guidance is available on the full range of issues in honors capstones, ranging from paperwork to presentation.

### *HNRS 300*

Every spring semester the Honors College offers multiple sections of HNRS 300. This 1-credit course is a systematic walk-through of all the steps required to propose and execute a high-quality honors capstone project. Topics include finding a topic, searching background literature, choosing a mentor, IRB/IACUC basics, presenting scholarly projects, and capstone paperwork. Most students take this course junior year so that they have their capstone proposal completed prior to senior year. Some students, especially education and nursing majors, take this course in their sophomore year.

### *Project Funding*

When possible, the Honors College typically reserves a small amount of funding (e.g., \$250/project) for honors capstones. These funds are for the execution of the project itself and not available for travel to presentations. Due to many university and state rules about how funds can be spent, students are encouraged to speak with the Honors College administrative specialist during the proposal stage to determine what is possible. Once the project is approved, students need to maintain strong communication with the Honors College office to ensure purchases can be made with enough time. Depending on the purchase, a month or more might be needed to receive the item.

### *Honors Capstone Showcase*

Every spring semester the Honors Capstone Showcase provides an honors-specific presentation venue within the Radford University Student Engagement Forum. Although the Showcase is optional, it is the most prominent and centralized venue for students to present their honors capstone projects. Both poster presentations and a limited number of podium presentations are typically available. Students who are interested in applying for the King Award are ***strongly encouraged*** to request a podium presentation at this event.

Although there is not a formal Honors College venue for fall semester presentations, the Office of Undergraduate Research & Scholarship typically holds a campus-wide event.

### *Honors Conference Travel*

Contingent on available budgets, a limited number of students typically receive financial support to present scholarly work at state, regional, or national honors conferences. Although any honors student may request this funding, priority is given to students presenting their capstone projects. General limitations and historic timelines are:

- *National Collegiate Honors Council*. Deadlines in late winter for mid-fall conferences. Typically one or two students supported for travel.
- *Southern Regional Honors Council*. Deadlines in early winter for early spring conferences. Typically 2-4 students supported for travel.
- *Virginias Collegiate Honors Council*. Deadlines in late winter for early spring conferences. Typically 4-8 students supported for travel.

## King Award for Scholarly Excellence in Honors

The King Award for Scholarly Excellence in Honors is named for Dr. Joe King, who was director of the then “Honors Academy” from 2003-2015. The inspiration for this award came from Dr. King's passion for the successful mentorship of scholarly honors capstones. This award does not go to the "best" honors student, but rather the student whose capstone and academic career exemplifies the integration of a novel idea into the existing scholarly work of the discipline.

Faculty mentors should encourage their student, when deemed appropriate, to apply for this award. Past winners have submitted honors capstone projects that were especially novel (e.g., unexpected interdisciplinary connections) or especially thorough (e.g., written thesis paper). Students who wish to be considered for the King Award are ***strongly encouraged*** to complete a podium presentation at the Honors Capstone Showcase. The winner of the King Award is announced at the Spring Banquet and invited to deliver the keynote address at the next fall's Honors Convocation.



## **Department Standards, Expectations, and Guidelines**

Unlisted departments do not have specific requirements beyond those listed in this handbook. New faculty mentors are encouraged to consult with senior department faculty to learn about past capstones and informal expectations.

### *Department X*

Guidance from department

### *Department Y*

Guidance from department

### *Department Z*

Guidance from department