

Requirements and Expectations for the Honors Program in Psychology, Child Development, Cognitive Studies, and Child Studies

A&S Psychology Majors register for Psychology 295a, 295b, 296a, 296b

Peabody Child Development, Cognitive Studies, Child Studies Majors register for PSY 2990 each semester; Honors Program Director: Craig Smith, craig.a.smith@vanderbilt.edu, 107b Jesup, 322-8298

Overview of the Honors Programs

The Honors Program offers students the opportunity to gain more intensive experience conducting scientific research with a faculty mentor. Participation in the program affords students the chance to collaborate on cutting-edge research in their major area, and to gain research skills and experiences that are of considerable value not only in preparation for graduate training but also in a variety of work settings. Students apply to participate in this program in the spring of their sophomore year, and the program is open to majors in Psychology, Child Development, Cognitive Studies, or Child Studies as a first or second major who maintain at least a 3.2 GPA both overall and in their major. Participants in the Honors program work collaboratively with their research mentor during their junior and senior years. Participation in the program culminates in the completion of an Honors Thesis and a presentation of the research conducted as a part of the thesis. The program is flexible enough to accommodate students who need to student teach and students who want to spend a semester abroad. Students who successfully complete the Honors Program and maintain an **overall GPA of at least 3.2** will graduate with the special designation of either "Honors" or "High Honors" in their Psychology, Child Development, Cognitive Studies, or Child Studies major.

Philosophy of the Honors Program

The program is designed to emphasize two of the essentials of a superior education: First, the student must be actively involved in all aspects of scholarship rather than acting as the passive recipient of other people's written and spoken words of wisdom. Second, the student must have considerable guidance from faculty mentors--in planning a course of study, in formulating research questions, in developing conceptual and technical skills, in evaluating research findings, and in presenting research in both written and oral reports. Each Honors student is viewed as a research apprentice, in the same sense that silversmiths, airline pilots, and surgeons learn by witnessing, emulating and receiving instruction from a master of the trade. The Honors Program is designed to provide hands-on training in all phases of research under optimal supervision.

Who is eligible?

The Honors Program is for majors in Psychology, Child Development, Cognitive Studies, or Child Studies who have an overall grade point average of 3.2. Although not a prerequisite, having taken at least two courses in your major is highly recommended. Statistics and Methods should be completed by no later than the end of junior year. These can be taken in either the Department of Psychology (A&S) or the Department of Psychology and Human Development (Peabody).

It should be emphasized that the Honors Program is not restricted to students who plan to do graduate work in psychology. The nature of the Program and the advantages of participation are suited to students with diverse professional and career goals.

Faculty Mentors

In order to participate in the program, interested students must first obtain a faculty mentor who agrees to supervise the honors research. Together, the student and faculty mentor complete a brief application to participate in the Honors Program. This application is then reviewed and approved by the director of the Honors program. Once the application is approved, the student is officially admitted to the Honors Program.

The faculty is fairly large and diverse; consequently, most patterns of students' interests can be matched with a professor. The Director of the Honors program will meet with interested students to discuss possible faculty mentors. **It is the students' responsibility to identify a faculty mentor who is willing to work with them on an Honors project.**

Course Structure

During the fall semester of the junior year, Honors students should enroll in the Honors Seminar, which is Psychology 295A for A&S majors and PSY 2990 for Peabody majors. Work for the fall semester includes (1) participation in research that is ongoing in the research mentor's laboratory, and (2) the preparation of 7-8 page literature review that will serve as the background for the introduction to the student's honors thesis. The student's mentor reads drafts of all written work including the literature review, proposal, and final thesis.

The majority of Honors students' time is spent working with their mentors on their research project. In addition, they meet periodically during the semester with the Honors Program coordinator to review progress on their papers and projects. One approved copy of the literature review is due to the Director of the Program by the end of the semester.

Work during the spring semester of the junior year includes (1) attendance at the Honors Seminar (295b for A&S and 2990 for Peabody) where students present their literature review to the group, (2) continued work in the laboratory, and (3) preparation of a written research proposal. The proposal outlines the research that the student will undertake. The research plan derives from numerous discussions between the student and the research mentor. Research proposals are due at the end of spring semester. For students who were abroad during their junior year, their literature review is due in the spring and their research proposal is due before classes begin the fall of their senior year.

During the senior year, students receive three hours credit for Psychology 296A and three hours credit for Psychology 296B in A&S or 3 credits each semester for PSY 2990 in Peabody. The Honors Seminar meets approximately once a month during the fall semester for presentation and discussion of students' research proposals. Students continue conducting the research outlined in the proposal, analyze the results, and write a thesis. The Honors Thesis presents the rationale for the project, the methods used, the results obtained, and a discussion of how the findings fit within the context of existing research literature. The Honors Thesis must be completed in early April of the senior year. Students will defend their thesis in front of a committee of three persons--their research advisor, another professor from the Department of Psychology or the Department of Psychology and Human Development and a graduate student who is knowledgeable about the area of research. The Director of the Honors program determines committee membership with suggestions from the research mentor. On Psychology Day, students present the final research project in the form of a poster.

The honors program is 4 semesters. However, students can complete the program in 3 semesters (due to travel abroad, student teaching, etc.) if they can find a research mentor who is willing to work with them. The student is still expected to complete the requirements of the program. Students who do the Honors program in 3 semesters, should continue working with their research advisor during the summer through the VUSR program or as a summer job, or double their research time during one semester.

Commitment to the Honors Program

Students and mentors should realize that participation in the Honors Program represents a substantial commitment of time and effort. Students should plan to devote an average of 10 hours a week to their honors-related work. This will mostly include working in the research lab, meeting with your research mentor, writing the literature review and research proposal, and attending the Honors Seminar about once a month. Therefore, potential participants must carefully consider whether they are able to, and want to, devote the required time and energy to this program.

Upon entering the program, however, the student is not committed to participate for the full two years. If after one or more semesters the student decides that the Honors Program is not consistent with his/her academic goals, there is no problem at all in getting out. In that case, full course credit for the hours taken in the Program is given. For example, if a student takes Psychology 295A (Honors Seminar) and subsequently decides not to participate further, full credit for the seminar would still be granted.

Expectations for the Student and Mentor

Two major goals of the program are to expose students to the full range of activities and skills associated with initiating, conducting, and successfully completing a research project, and to encourage students to appropriately apply these skills to the successful execution and completion of their own honors project. However, it is highly unlikely that the student will come into the honors program with all the knowledge and skills necessary to immediately jump into their honors research. Thus, for training and didactic purposes, especially in the early semesters of the program, honors students can reasonably expect to perform a variety of research-related tasks that may have little or no direct bearing on their specific project. These activities can range from the mundane (e.g., xeroxing, scheduling subjects, data entry), which may be requested for practical and didactic purposes, to the more interesting and exotic (e.g., data collection, data analysis, or the performance of highly technical laboratory procedures), which may be requested more purely for training purposes. Nonetheless, honors students should not be treated like paid research assistants and the activities they engage in should have a clear educational purpose. If at any point an honors student is unsure of why s/he is being asked to engage in a given activity, s/he should discuss the reasons behind the activity with the faculty mentor. Mentors should be committed to making students' research experiences as educational as possible, and should be willing to discuss the reasons for engaging in particular activities in particular ways and at particular times, as well as where these activities fit in to the larger scheme of the mentor's research program. Finally, beyond training purposes, when the honors project represents a piece of a larger research endeavor, even when they have begun to primarily focus on their specific piece of the project, students may be asked to contribute to the larger project in ways that only indirectly support their individual project. However, such contributions should not be at a level that interferes with their ability to complete their honors project in a timely fashion.

An additional set of issues concerns the nature and scope of the honors project itself. It is anticipated that the honors project will almost always be derived in some way from the mentor's ongoing research program. For example, the project might be a distinct facet of a much larger research project, or it might be a new experiment (or small series of experiments) that follows directly from some earlier findings that have emerged from the mentor's research laboratory. However, as much as possible, the mentor should encourage the student to take intellectual ownership of his or her honors project. At minimum the student must have a clear and deep understanding of what the research project involves and why; that is, the nature and significance of the research questions being asked, how the study's methods and data map onto these questions, how the data analyses address these questions, the implications of the observed results, and so on. Ideally, to the extent feasible, the student should make substantive contributions to the design, conceptualization, analysis, and/or interpretation of the aspects of the study comprising his or her project. Except in very rare instances, however, the student should not expect to engage in research activities entirely of his or her design that have little or no direct connection to the mentor's research program.

In terms of the scope of the project, the student and faculty mentor should work together to ensure that the honors project is feasible, and that it can be successfully completed within the constraints of the students' planned participation in the honors program. At the outset of their participation in the Honors Program, the student and mentor should discuss and reach an agreement concerning how many semesters, as well as the number of hours each week, the student plans to devote to the project (and this time-commitment should conform to the general expectations described above). Given his or her much greater expertise in these matters, the faculty mentor is primarily responsible for ensuring that the project does not evolve into something overly grandiose or impractical that cannot reasonably be completed within the negotiated time constraints.

As conceptualized, the ideal progression on the honors project is: (1) to receive research training while reading the literature, and conceptualizing and planning the honors project during the first semester; (2) to propose the honors project by the end of the second semester; (3) to collect, analyze, and interpret the data during the middle semester(s) and into the final semester; and (4) to devote a substantial portion of the final semester to writing the thesis. In practice, however, students can expect that the development of their project may deviate significantly from this progression.

Because research is, by definition, an exploration into the unknown, surprises often arise that force an investigator to alter his or her research plans. Initial pilot testing of the research ideas may highlight the need for additional, unanticipated pilot testing; planned procedures may prove to be unworkable; unanticipated findings may lead one to reconsider one's original research questions or hypotheses; and so on. Thus, students should not be overly concerned if they discover a need to alter their research plans somewhat (sometimes even substantially) as the project progresses. However, it is expected that such changes will be discussed by the student and mentor as the need for them becomes evident, and that the changes actually implemented will be consensually agreed upon. The student should not make substantive changes to his or her project without consulting with the mentor, and the mentor should not mandate changes without first discussing/explaining them to the student. Again, given the mentor's greater experience with the research process, the mentor is primarily responsible for ensuring that such changes to the research plan do not render the students' project unfeasible or preclude its being completed in a timely fashion.

A final set of expectations concerns the faculty mentor's supervision of the honors student. The faculty mentor is the person who is primarily responsible for supervising the student's progress

through the honors program. This in no way precludes the possibility that the student will work closely with a graduate student, post-doctoral fellow, and/or research faculty member on a day-to-day basis. However, the faculty mentor cannot transfer mentorship to someone else who is otherwise ineligible to serve as a mentor. Thus, the mentor is directly responsible for monitoring the student's progress, s/he should meet with the student on a regular basis (individually and/or in group research meetings), and s/he should generally be available to meet with the student to discuss various issues related to the project as they arise.

Applying for the program

Ideally, arrangements should be negotiated with the faculty mentor, the completed application to the program should be turned into the program director, and the student should be registered for PSY 295a (A&S) or 2990 (Peabody) by the end of Fall Pre-registration in the spring of the student's sophomore year. However, it is possible to register for required courses and to participate in the Honors Program (assuming all other requirements are met) right up through the end of the change period at the start of fall classes.

Advantages to the Student

The major advantage to the student in participating in the Honors Program is that it represents an educational experience superior to that offered by the usual list of course offerings. Regardless of the student's choice of future career, he/she should benefit by the opportunities for carefully supervised independent study and active participation in research.

If the student intends to pursue graduate studies, a second major benefit accrues. Students in the Honors Program are treated very much like graduate students in psychology. They work alongside graduate students and they do many of the same tasks; consequently, they learn in a direct manner what it is like to perform graduate work.

A third important advantage to the student is that successful participation provides an opportunity to acquire authoritative letters of recommendations for subsequent study or employment. Both the student's mentor and the Coordinator of the Honors Program get to know students well.

Fourth, and not to be forgotten, successful participation in the program is an honor. It is recognized as such on the diploma, on the transcript, and in letters of recommendation. Fifth, and perhaps even much more important than the other considerations, is the fact that the Honors Program provides a very stimulating and enjoyable set of experiences. Work in the Program is both productive and fun.

During spring semester, the Coordinator of the Honors Program will call a meeting for students interested in the Honors Program. The purpose of the meeting will be to answer general questions and schedule appointments for individual meetings. Students should turn in copies of their transcripts to when they submit their application to the Program Director.

Students interested in the program may contact:

Craig A. Smith

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You can work with a faculty mentor from either Psychology Department (i.e., Peabody or A&S).

List of Faculty and their research interests in both Psychology Departments:

http://www.vanderbilt.edu/psychological_sciences/people/faculty

Note that it is also possible to work with other psychologically-oriented faculty (e.g., in the Department of Special Education, and others) when the topic is appropriate to a psychology honors project. In cases in which the mentor will be coming from a department other than one of the Psychology Departments, the potential honors major should consult with the Program Director regarding the appropriateness of the mentor and project before applying to the program