



What is Honors?

The Drake Honors program sparks a passion for lifelong learning, fostering creativity, collaboration, and leadership both in and out of the classroom. This form of education is distinguished by activities that are intentionally broader, deeper, and more complex than typical college-level experiences. More distinctly, Honors courses are *interdisciplinary*, and not designed to be “hard.” Instead, they act as exploratory spaces for innovative and critical thinking through a discussion-based, reading and writing intensive, interdisciplinary curriculum. The Drake Honors program offers a unique, student-driven learning environment tailored to align with the institution's culture and mission. And unlike a cohort of students in a specific major, Honors students join a community of learners from all disciplines and major programs, increasing the diversity and form of thought in which they engage. The Drake Honors program also support and encourages the making of meaningful connections with peers while also attending to personal, academic, and social growth.

What is Interdisciplinarity, and why does it matter?

Multidisciplinary

Multidisciplinarity involves studying a topic through the lens of multiple distinct disciplines simultaneously. Each discipline provides its own perspective, contributing to a wider understanding of the topic without merging insights. For example, examining human behavior can be approached from psychology, biology, and economics, with each discipline retaining its unique perspective. In higher education, this might look like guest lecturers from various fields sharing their expertise on a common subject or student groups conducting research from different disciplinary angles on the same question.

Interdisciplinary

Interdisciplinary thinking goes a step further by attempting to merge insights from different disciplines to gain a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues. This integration can occur at the level of methods, tools, concepts, theories, or insights, creating a result that is greater than the sum of its parts. In a higher education setting, interdisciplinary work may benefit from students representing various disciplines. Faculty from different departments may collaborate to design courses that teach students specific techniques for integrating diverse perspectives.

Transdisciplinary

Transdisciplinarity extends beyond academia by involving external partners—such as community organizations, companies, or government agencies—in investigating complex problems. This approach combines academic knowledge with practical insights to develop solutions or strategies that have tangible social impacts. An example would be students collaborating with local municipalities or businesses to co-create approaches that are both theoretically informed and practically applicable.

The Drake Honors program aims for a comprehensive education through interdisciplinary thinking. However, first-year students are not expected to know how to do this kind of work.

Entry-level Honors courses may begin with a multidisciplinary approach and eventually transition to interdisciplinary thinking. Middle-level courses will be primarily interdisciplinary and sometimes slide into transdisciplinary work. Upper-level courses are primarily a mix of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary thinking and inquiry. Since Drake is an educational institution, and students come to Drake to learn, students are “met where they are” and then guided to where we hope they can be.

What does it mean to have a discussion-based course?

Drake Honors courses are enrollment-capped at 20 students so that these smaller class sizes will facilitate more student participation, engagement, and investment. Honors courses are discussion-oriented classes where students often complete readings and assignments in advance, then engage in discussions about key themes or topics during class. This approach is influenced by Vygotsky’s social learning theory which asserts that knowledge and understanding are developed through peer-to-peer interaction. Honors courses are developed specifically with discussion-based learning in mind, and courses are approved for Honors credit with a significant emphasis placed on instructor pedagogy rather than course discipline, field, or topic. Honors instructors are expected to guide rich discussions that help students expand their knowledge frameworks and achieve deeper learning. Students often prefer small group discussions over the large group or whole-class format, and Drake Honors instructors typically incorporate both small and whole-class learning experiences. The emphasis on peer-to-peer interaction, collaboration, and co-learning helps student grow as communicators. As students become more comfortable with verbal interactions, they can combine those developing skills with ever-increasingly more complex ideas. This method also encourages a student to *listen* as much as, or more than, they talk, and as such, they can become a better co-learner, co-worker, and maybe even a better friend to others.

What is involved in a reading and writing intensive course?

A "reading and writing intensive" Honors course typically involves a curriculum that places a strong emphasis on engaging with texts of varying complexity and form, and producing written work that integrates knowledge from those texts in very specific ways. A typical Honors course might involve...:

1. **In-Depth Reading Assignments:** The key is depth, not “a lot of pages.” Readings are sourced from a range of challenging, interdisciplinary, and/or primary sources. This may include classic literature, philosophical texts, original research, and scholarly articles, all aimed at developing a student’s ability to analyze, interpret, and synthesize diverse perspectives.
2. **Critical Engagement with Texts:** Students are also asked to develop skill in critically engaging the texts they read. This might involve annotating texts, discussing key themes in depth, identifying arguments, evaluating evidence, and questioning authors’ assumptions and methods. Honors courses often encourage students to move beyond surface comprehension to a more nuanced and complex understanding.

3. **Frequent and Varied Writing Assignments:** Student can expect to complete a range of written assignments, such as analytical essays, research papers, response papers, or reflective journals. These assignments are designed by Honors instructors to challenge students to articulate complex ideas, build coherent arguments, and provide evidence-based analysis. As with the readings, “intensive” does not mean “30-page paper.” Instead the focus is on specific, deliberate, and carefully constructed writing products, often in only a few pages
4. **Opportunities for Revision and Feedback:** Another key component of an Honors course is a reiterative learning and writing process. Students are likely to receive regular feedback on their work and have opportunities to revise their drafts or incorporate instructor suggestions into subsequent assignments. This process helps students refine their ideas, improve clarity, and strengthen their arguments.
5. **Development of Advanced Communication Skills:** In addition to their interpersonal communication growth through discussion-based learning, students complete written assignments specifically designed to help them express their ideas clearly and persuasively.
6. **Higher Expectations for Intellectual Independence:** Lastly, students in the Honors program are expected to develop skills in self-directed reading and research, taking ownership of their learning. Students might be expected to choose topics of personal interest, seek out additional readings, or pursue deeper inquiry into subjects introduced in class. In other words, students are expected to become more adept at learning how to learn when a teacher or instructor is not around, developing their autonomy and competencies.