When You’re Ready…

Conventional Undergraduate Assessment

Grades

A  B  C  D  F

Freshmen  Sophomore  Junior  Senior  Graduation

Credit Hours

The familiar dominant assessment system is a function of two variables, the credit hours and the grade. A student’s progress is measured by earning per course credit hours; the quality of the progress is measured by the average of their course grades weighted by those credit hours.

One of the problems with the current model is that it discourages exploration and taking.

No more “Economic!”

Conventional Doctoral Assessment

Coursework

Proposal

Quals

Research

Defense

Credit Independent

Original Research

Project Based

Although students’ coursework might be evaluated with grades, the grades serve a more diagnostic purpose than at the undergraduate level.

The two most common assessment milestones are qualification or general or preliminary exams, which are often seen as indicating a student’s ability to do research and teach.

The dissertation proposal or prospectus demonstrates the viability of the student’s specific project.

In most doctoral programs, the primary goal is to prepare the student to produce an independent piece of original research (or its equivalent) and, at least conventionally, to enter an academic profession able to teach.

The student graduates when she has completed the research and successfully defends it.

Existing LSA Honors Models

Historically, the honors thesis has been one of the few ways for a liberal arts undergraduate to escape the conventional model of undergraduate assessment. It is almost invariably project-based, and at least partly independent of course grades. It is generally constrained by the undergraduate four-year timeline, but nevertheless also largely independent of the credit-hour system.

The models below show some of the variety students are able to graduate with Honors in LSA. Most such models involve honors theses. In some departments, the theses require an oral defense while in others they do not.

In some LSA departments (e.g., Political Science), students take a research seminar course and then apply to the honors major, usually with the work produced from the course and grades.

In some LSA departments, the honors thesis is 100% independent of the student’s academic performance. They are usually an extension of the student’s research activity in a lab and part of the lab’s research project.

In some LSA departments (e.g., Mathematics), the honors major simply involves demanding coursework.

Proposed Engaged Honors Model

The LSA Honors Program is creating a new model for graduating with Honors. The purpose of the model is to recognize students who integrate civil engagement or leadership with their academic work. In the proposed model, a student, wishing to pursue this degree, would:

- enter the Honors Program by a proposal that draws from some prior coursework, like honors coursework and, most importantly, by a civil engagement or leadership activity that is articulated in a research and which, in turn, enriches the coursework.

Demonstrate his or her having met the standard via a reflective defense that enumerates the ways the proposed goals were met.

The standard does not require a specific number of courses, and whether the student has met the standard is largely independent of grades, just like a doctoral dissertation is independent of the student’s grades.

“Honors,” that is, opportunities for ambitious and high-achieving students have historically been the few ways undergraduates can pursue alternatives to the most common assessment schemes. The LSA Honors Program is hoping to capitalize on these alternatives and create new ones for students beyond the conventional measures of “high achievement.”