

AU Honors Challenge Course Guide

The AU Honors Challenge Course (HNRS-398) is a 3-credit group research project for AU Honors students. The Honors Challenge Course is meant to enable a student-led, multi-disciplinary effort to grapple with a significant problem or issue by drawing on more than one tradition of inquiry. Students in a group should all be working on the same specific topic or question and contributing to a final project using their various areas of expertise and skill sets. Student groups form in the Fall semester preceding the Challenge Course; AU Honors holds a “Challenge Course matching event” in November to facilitate this process.

The course functions much like a directed reading or independent study course, in that the small group meets with a faculty mentor to complete a single group project over the course of a semester; the faculty mentor provides guidance and mentorship rather than formal classroom instruction. Therefore, there is no centrally scheduled class meeting time or location for the Challenge Course. Students are guided by a faculty mentor who builds a syllabus and mentors students through the process of asking and answering a pressing question in an intellectually serious way. AU Honors can help groups locate a faculty mentor. All faculty mentors will be confirmed by the end of January during the semester of the Challenge Course; many are confirmed the previous November and December.

At the end of the semester, students will present their work as part of the AU Honors Research Conference, in whatever format is most appropriate: slides, a video, an exhibition, etc. The faculty mentor also assigns each student a grade of Pass or Fail at the end of the semester, with a Pass indicating that the student has participated in and contributed to the group process and project as expected.

Because of the variety of topics and approaches that student groups select, there is no single recipe or format for how a challenge course experience unfolds. But four steps are definitely a part of every challenge course:

1. The first step is for a group to articulate a project summary in a paragraph or two describing their research question and the way(s) they would like to go about answering that question. This should be done **before the end of the Fall semester preceding the Challenge Course**. If a group has a faculty mentor already lined up then this project statement should be written with the faculty mentor’s input; if not, then the statement can serve as a resource for locating an appropriate faculty mentor.
2. The second step is for the group to complete the group contract, and the funding application if the project requires or would benefit from additional funding. The group contract includes a project timeline; if the timeline has to be modified subsequently, that can be done by mutual consent of the members of the group and their faculty mentor.
3. The third step is for the group to work, over the course of the semester, to complete their project. This is the step where the details vary the most between groups and projects.
4. The fourth and final step is for the group to present their project at the AU Honors Research Conference at the end of the semester. The presentation can take different forms depending on the character of the project. Note that **unlike in HNRS-151, the presentation is not the project**. Instead, the presentation is *about* the project, whether that project itself is a website, a database, a paper, a film, or something else.

Below is guidance from previous faculty mentors and students who have successfully completed the course.

Guidance for Faculty Mentors, from Faculty Mentors:

1. How many hours did you spend (per week or per month) interacting with your team? This can include face-to-face and virtual interactions:
 - “We met weekly in person or via Zoom, plus emails.”
 - “Bi-weekly”
 - “Sometimes more than once/week”
 - “As was established in the syllabus, we were to meet 6 times during the semester.”
 - “1-2 hours every other week face-to-face, weekly nearer the end of the semester. Finding a time to meet that fit all of the students schedules was not easy.”
 - “We had a standing weekly 90-minute meeting every Wednesday morning (8:30-10:00 am). Touching base like this was really key. The students also had a standing meeting on Friday afternoons without me.”
 - “When the semester began (starting with the first week of the semester), I met with the students for about an hour a week. They were debating focus groups versus a survey, so many of the first meetings were about discussing the pros and cons of both approaches, what they would need to do for their IRB application, and what due dates would be feasible for them. In October, we met every two weeks. We only met once in-person in November, although we e-mailed back-and-forth as needed. My last in-person meeting with them was in early December for the Showcase and a few days later, they submitted their final project to me.”

2. How many hours did you spend (per week or per month) working on the project outside of team meeting time?
 - “1-2 hours/week”
 - “We met more times than anticipated, especially towards the end of the semester. Also, was regular correspondence through email and google docs.”
 - “A few hours between each meeting.”

3. Was the workload more or less what you expected? How did it differ from expectations?
 - Generally, faculty have found that the groups are highly motivated and that the workload is appropriate for the objectives of the course. The general theme was that groups that had regular meetings and communication worked better together and overall expectations were management and met/exceeded for the mentoring experience.
 - “About what I expected. Different from expectations (and my own efforts) was to spread the student work out over the semester rather than letting it pile up in the last few weeks. I was successful in making them start early enough that they were able to work out and discard or refine the various versions of their project in time to be able to do real work on the one they ended up on.”

- “The workload was about what I anticipated. The fact that we had the weekly meeting helped me keep my portion of the challenge course related work largely confined to those hours. The students always knew when their next meeting with me was so they would amass questions/concerns for both me and the group as a whole and then we would discuss them all Wednesday morning (rather than emailing them randomly throughout the week).”
 - “Honestly, I think because I met with the students so early in the semester, and because we quickly established a clear game plan, the work was less than what I expected later in the semester. I am also honored to have worked with a pretty stellar group of students, who I think are incredibly hard working and who are able to work independently. “
4. Please identify one aspect of the challenge course team mentoring that worked well and that you would recommend as a "best practice" to future supervising faculty.
- “Have the deadlines and expectations on a syllabus.”
 - “Establish a strict meeting schedule, don’t meet ‘as needed.’ Block the time each week to meet with all students together and keep them on schedule.”
 - “I followed the lead of my team, letting them stumble into some struggles (common to research) then worked alongside them to figure them out. I think that the student-led dimension of this course was very valuable so reflecting that in the mentorship is important.”
 - “Working with the students on conceptualizing the project. This took a lot of time at the beginning and necessary tweaks along the way.”
 - “Force the students to write together. I think they learned a lot by having to produce something substantial.”
 - “Start planning and communicating with the group as early as possible. For example, if the request to mentor comes in November, start in November rather than January.”
 - “Make sure students understand that the faculty mentor is able to offer more than just advice on books and journals. Mentors can also put students in contact with appropriate professionals in the DC area and use their contacts to support the students.”
 - “Identify your personal supervisory style before meeting with the group. This will help manage group expectations.”
 - “The best part of the course was definitely the students who are very driven and committed. I recommend have a clear project in mind from the start so that students can work on it early on.”
 - “Meeting with them all in a room as regularly as possible. Making them accountable for at least some kind of progress between each meeting. I was pleased at being able to let them be self-directed and help them refine their own ideas and find common ground within their disparate interests and expertise rather than feeding them my own or settling for a more boilerplate compromise.”
 - “I required my students to keep labor logs and write weekly labor journals reflecting on the labor they conducted each week. This helped the students assess where they were at in the larger project, not lose the forest for the trees, and be reflective about

the conduct of research. These journals also provided me a lot of earnest and frank insight into how the students were making sense of their work. (I would be happy to talk more about this if you are interested in the model).”

- “Meeting and communicating on a regular basis is key. Typically, the team has an idea that is vast in scope at the beginning so one of the most essential roles I play is to help them narrow and hone their concept. Helping them to determine what succinct question they are trying to answer is a successful approach.”
- “I think starting the very first week of classes was really important. I e-mailed my students 10 days before the semester started and suggested a few options for regular meetings times throughout the semester, so they were able to coordinate amongst themselves and put me in their schedule ASAP. Because of that, we were able to be productive the very first week of classes. I also emphasized to the students early on that all research has unexpected challenges, and so we build in "extra time" in case the IRB /survey process took longer than expected. Meeting early in the semester and managing students' expectations about what they could accomplish within a semester, was really helpful (as was setting up due dates early on).”

Guidance for Faculty Mentors, from Students:

1. One thing my faculty mentor did that most benefited our group:
 - Gave us honest advice using personal experience
 - Introduced us to colleagues, who we were able to interview
 - Helped us focus our topic
 - Edited drafts and gave really compelling intellectual feedback about our argument
 - Helped us understand current landscape in field
 - Pushed us to think more critically
2. One thing my faculty mentor could have done better to help our group:
 - Have a set meeting time so it is always scheduled on our calendars
 - Help us consider the product we were creating and what to do with it after the course (submit it to conferences, publish it, etc.)
 - Respond to emails and communicate with us regularly

Guidance for Students, from Students:

1. How often did your group meet?
 - a. Most groups met weekly
 - b. Some groups met bi-weekly
2. How many hours each week did you spending working on the Challenge Course?
 - a. 1-3 and 4-6 hours per week were the most common responses
3. How did your group meet?
 - a. Most groups met in-person
 - b. Some groups had an even combination of in-person and virtual meetings
4. What advice do you have for students taking the Challenge Course in the future?
 - a. Topic & group choice:
 - i. Make sure everyone on the team is passionate about the topic you choose

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- ii. Choose to work with people who want to do the same level of work as you
- b. Team roles:
 - i. Assign clear roles and define the vision for the project early on
- c. Timing:
 - i. Meet weekly
 - ii. Start early!
 - iii. Use the semester prior to start working