

POLITICS DEPARTMENT HONORS PROGRAM

The Politics Department Honors Program at Oberlin College offers an opportunity for students to pursue sustained independent reading and research under faculty supervision. The honors program consists of an honors thesis that involves enrollment in the Politics honors seminar in both the fall and spring of the senior year, a substantial piece of original research conducted over the course of the senior year, and an oral thesis defense administered at the end of the senior year.

We encourage students interested in the Honors program to discuss their interests and intentions with faculty members early (in the junior year) and often (as seniors too). There are advantages and disadvantages to pursuing honors, and we believe that students who have carefully and realistically considered how the program fits into their academic program will make the most appropriate choices about how to allocate their time and efforts during their senior year.

Invitation into Honors in Junior Year

At the beginning of the spring semester junior year, the Department invites, at its discretion, students to apply to the Honors program. In deciding whether to invite a student to apply, the Department considers the performance and number of courses taken in the Politics Major, as well as in broader College work. For those invited to apply to the honors program in their junior year, admission for the senior year is conditional upon the submission of a *writing sample* and *statement of interest* in Honors to the department by the end of the junior year, continued strong performance in Politics coursework, and the availability of faculty to serve as mentors and advisers for the honors thesis project. These documents are designed to evaluate the preparation and ability of students to complete the honors program successfully. The remainder of this section describes the writing sample and statement of interest.

The *writing sample* should speak to the student's ability to engage in research in political science. It would normally be a research paper written in a Politics seminar (300-level) in the course of the junior year. If a student is unable to take a Politics seminar during their junior year -- because of scheduling conflicts or study abroad -- they may discuss with their adviser in the Politics Department whether an alternative *writing sample* would suffice. This might be a paper written for an intermediate-level class with some research component or a piece of free-standing research written while abroad or over the summer. The *writing sample*, whether a seminar paper, or any other piece of writing, need not have a relationship to the subject-matter of the senior honors thesis.

The *statement of interest* in honors is designed to encourage students to engage in some preliminary thinking about their senior honors thesis. The department recognizes that the research project may evolve or change between the submission of the *statement of interest* and the first semester of the senior year; students are not committing themselves to a particular topic or approach. However, we do want students to have given some

serious thought to a thesis topic, and we need to be sure that we have faculty available in the senior year to serve as mentors and advisers for the proposed research topics. To that end, we would expect that students have made preliminary contact with an honors thesis adviser (whether this be their existing major advisor or another member of the Politics department) before they apply at the end of the junior year. Interested students should consult with either their academic adviser or another member of the Politics Department with whom they anticipate working on honors in the senior year, as they prepare their *statement of interest*. It is due to the faculty Honors Director, along with the *writing sample*, at the end of the spring semester of the junior year, and will be read by the department as part of the process of determining invitation into the honors program.

The *statement of interest* in Honors should contain the following elements: 1) the likely subject-matter of the honors thesis; 2) the scholarly literature(s) that the student anticipates drawing upon in writing the thesis; 3) a brief statement of why the student believes they would benefit from participation in the honors program; 4) a list of courses already taken in the department. As noted above, responses to # 1 & 2 are understood to be preliminary and subject to change. The department is asking in this statement only for the student's initial thoughts and planning for senior honors.

With the *writing sample* and *statement of interest* in hand, the department meets at the end of the spring semester to invite students to join the honors program. After the meeting, the Honors Coordinator will email students to indicate whether they have been invited into honors.

Honors in the Senior Year

All senior honors students will be enrolled in POLT 403 in the fall and POLT 404 in the spring. Both honors courses are graded at the end of the spring semester, with the grade deferred (an interim grade of *) in the fall.

Students choose an honors adviser who takes primary responsibility for supervising the thesis and preparing the student for the thesis defense. The advisory and mentoring role of the honors adviser is the cornerstone of the Oberlin College Politics Department's honors program. The honors adviser should be a Politics faculty member with some expertise in the intended area of research of the honors thesis. Students planning on participating in honors in their senior year should identify potential advisers and initiate a conversation about the possibility of working together along with possible thesis topics during the spring semester of their junior year. This conversation will help prepare students in writing the *statement of interest* in honors.

Students must also identify a "second reader" in the department, who will offer additional advice and feedback on the honors thesis. Students are expected to meet periodically with their second reader and keep them apprised of progress with the honors thesis.

In addition to individual meetings between the honors student and their honors adviser and second reader, there will be periodic seminar-style meetings of all senior honors

students in Politics with the faculty Honors Coordinator. It is anticipated that there will be about four such meetings each semester of the senior year. Their purpose will be to offer general guidance about the honors process, to provide a forum for students to present their work in progress and received feedback from their peers, and to prepare for the thesis defense.

The Honors Thesis

The honors thesis is a major piece of original research, often based on primary sources. The length and format of the honors thesis may vary by field and subject-matter; students should consult with their honors advisers as to appropriate expectations for the thesis. Drafts are presented to the honors adviser, the second reader, and periodically to the other Honors students, and subsequently revised for submission in mid-April.

The Honors Thesis Defense

The thesis is read by the honors adviser, the second reader, and a third reader who is either outside the Politics subfield central to the thesis, outside the Politics Department altogether, or outside Oberlin College. The primary and second readers in consultation with the student identify the third reader. The primary and second readers will consider whether the defense would be enhanced by a third reader who might offer breadth (i.e. someone outside the subfield or the department) or depth (i.e. an expert in the area outside the College).

The faculty Honors Coordinator will schedule and moderate the oral thesis defense. Following a short presentation by the student, the three examiners will have an opportunity to ask questions. The thesis defense would not normally exceed 75 minutes. The thesis defense is open to the public.

Evaluation of Honors

Following the thesis defense, the three examiners will evaluate the thesis and the oral defense and attempt to find consensus on the level of honors to recommend to the department (no honors, honors, high honors, highest honors). If the examiners disagree, the recommendation of each examiner will be forwarded to the full department, which will deliberate to determine the recommendation to be brought to the College Honors at Graduation Committee.

Students are also graded in each of the courses (POLT 403, 404) of the honors program, and these letter grades appear upon final transcripts. The faculty Honors Coordinator will determine the letter grade for POLT 403 and 404 in consultation with the thesis readers. When granted, honors evaluations also appear on the transcript. In the event that a student is not recommended for honors, enrollment in POLT 403 and 404 will be retroactively converted into Private Reading (POLT 995) enrollment, and an appropriate grade will be recorded for the transcript.