POLITICS DEPARTMENT HONORS PROGRAM (2016)

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 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, and continued strong performance in Politics coursework. 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. 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 member of faculty who is serving as Director of the Honors Program, 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 Director of Honors 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. POLT 403 and 404 are both 4-credit courses. Students receive letter grades in each of the courses (POLT 403, 404), and these letter grades appear upon final transcripts. Both honors courses are graded at the end of the spring semester, with the letter grade deferred (an interim grade of *) in the fall. The primary thesis adviser and the director of the Honors Program determine the letter grade for POLT 403 and 404 jointly.

This letter grade is distinct from the evaluation of honors. The evaluation of the honors thesis and oral defense is discussed below. Students can be awarded No Honors, Honors, High Honors or Highest Honors. When granted Honors or above, these 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.

Students choose an honors adviser (the “primary reader”) who takes the main 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 Director of the Honors Program. 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

Each senior honors student in the Politics Department will participate in an oral defense of their honors thesis. The oral defense will take place in the second half of April of the senior year, after the honors thesis is completed and submitted by the student. Members of the oral defense committee should have at least a week to read the thesis before the oral defense takes place.

The oral defense committee is composed of three faculty, normally at least two of whom come from within the Politics Department. The three faculty are the primary thesis adviser of the student, their second reader, and a third faculty member, selected through the mutual agreement of the honors student, their primary adviser, and the director of the honors program. The third member of the committee can be faculty from the Politics Department, but should normally be outside the field of the student, from another department or program at Oberlin College, or from outside of Oberlin altogether.

The oral defense will last approximately an hour, and will be scheduled by the director of the honors program. Each oral defense will be chaired by the primary thesis adviser. The role of the chair is to manage the oral defense, calling on student and faculty to speak as appropriate, keeping track of time, and, once the oral defense is over, to lead the evaluation discussion. The oral defense is open to the public.

Once the chair begins the oral defense, the honors student will have an opportunity to make a statement outlining the aim of the thesis, its main findings and its wider importance within the field. This statement should last about 10 minutes. After the statement, the remainder of the oral defense will consist of questions from the three
faculty, responses from the student, and discussion among the participants, moderated by the primary adviser. There is no precise format for the oral defense other than the introductory statement from the student. Each member of faculty can be allotted approximately 15 minutes to ask questions, or a more free-flowing exchange can take place in which each member of the oral defense committee asks questions where appropriate. Questions and topics of discussion can range widely. They can focus upon the thesis itself, but they should also go beyond the thesis to ask the student to locate their thesis work within the broader discipline, or to speculate about the implications of the thesis work for politics and public policy. The members of the oral defense committee can use their questions to push students beyond the comfort zone of their direct thesis work to see how their honors work has shaped their thinking about political science.

Evaluation of Honors

At a suitable moment, the chair will bring the oral defense to an end and dismiss the student. The three faculty members of the oral defense committee will then remain for approximately 15 minutes to evaluate the student’s honors work. This evaluation will consist of both the written thesis and the oral defense. The chair will lead the discussion, inviting each member of the oral defense committee to offer an evaluation. Once the discussion is concluded, the chair will write a brief summary of the evaluation discussion (something on the order of a paragraph) and send it to the director of the honors program. If a clear consensus around the appropriate level of honors to be awarded the student emerged among the members of the oral defense committee, the chair will report to that effect. If there were differences, that should also be reported.

The director of honors will circulate the summaries to the entire department ahead of a meeting on the first Monday in May at which the department will formally make honors recommendations to the Coordinator of Honors at Graduation in the Office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences.