



## Something Completely Different: An Honors Tutorial College Undergraduate Education

The purpose of this document is to give some guidance about why HTC is different and why those differences matter. If you get only one thing out of this piece of paper it should be the following: *for 99% of the individuals who end up matriculating in the Honors Tutorial College learning by tutorial is vastly different from any other form of educational methodology they have encountered.* That you have never quite experienced anything like it is perfectly normal. The system of secondary education in this nation for a variety of different reasons lacks the capacity to replicate what happens in a tutorial.

The best way to describe the tutorial experience is “education without a safety net.” In other educational settings, you can be anonymous; you can be passive; you can insist on staying in a comfort zone. HTC students do not have these alternatives. Because of the individualized nature of the tutorial, tutees are front and center. It is an exciting way to acquire an undergraduate education, but a high level of preparation and engagement are obligatory at every tutorial meeting.

Becoming an HTC student involves a clear-cut determination that you want to acquire the skills, the self-knowledge, and the drive needed to be an intelligent interpreter, communicator, and creator of ideas. In order to thrive in the Honors Tutorial College, you need to have experienced the true pangs of intellectual hunger. Those dribs and drabs that have been plopped on your tray as you moved from grade to grade do not come anywhere near giving you what you need to feed your head, and you know it.

In describing the tutorial program to prospective students we use certain adjectives to identify the type of student we want to attract—self-motivated, mature, inquisitive, flexible, creative, disciplined, etc. In the Honors Tutorial College these words are not used idly; they are used vitally. Individuals who thrive in HTC possess unique personal characteristics (which we happily celebrate and encourage), but they also share the following attributes:

- *A deep-seated passion for learning.* There can't be any compromise here. Take a minute to look up the word “passion” in the dictionary. It is a complicated word that encompasses exultation and struggle. Naturally we hope that your experiences will always tilt toward the uplifting end, but there is no getting around the fact that passion requires true commitment, and that true commitment often results in a tribulation or two.
- *An ability to concentrate.* The ability to focus mental attention on a particular problem or task is essential. There are many distractions in the life of a college student. HTC students should take advantage of the personal enrichment these opportunities offer, but they must also know when to step back and get down to business.
- *A willingness to begin with basics.* Implicit in this characteristic is a recognition that academic prowess cannot substitute for a thorough grounding in fundamentals.
- *The capacity to be a fearless questioner equipped with the understanding that answers are rarely simple.* One of the advantages of studying in a tutorial setting is the ability to ask questions. In fact, tutors rightly expect their HTC students to come prepared with questions. Questions function as the grist of the tutorial mill. Likewise, tutors anticipate that HTC students will recognize that often there is not a “right” answer to a question. In fact, the better the question the less likely you are to find a clear-cut, unambiguous answer.
- *An energy (both mental and physical) that finds its source in intellectual growth.*
- *An understanding that true learning never takes place within a comfort zone.* You will be supported as an HTC student in your academic endeavors, but you will also be challenged.
- *A keenness for reading that cannot be deterred.*

- *A sense of humor.* A robust wit and an inclination to see the absurd side of life not only provides the best of all possible coping mechanisms, but is intimately connected to creativity, integrity, and the type of community we aspire to have in the Honors Tutorial College.

When it comes to making an important decision such as where to matriculate as an undergraduate, there is no such thing as having too much information, particularly when the educational methodology in question is so different. Consequently, we have put together a brief set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) followed by Frequently Answered Answers (FAAs). Don't hesitate to contact us if you have additional questions.

**FAQ:** What exactly is a tutorial?

**FAA:** A tutorial consists either of a one-on-one course with a professor or a small seminar with a professor and a handful of HTC students. Usually during the course of an undergraduate career, most students will experience both types of tutorials.

**FAQ:** What is the difference between a tutorial and an independent study course?

**FAA:** At most universities, independent studies are arranged on an *ad hoc* basis between students and professors. Typically, students are not allowed to enroll in an independent study course unless they have junior or senior standing and have completed a specified number of hours in their major. Independent study courses vary widely in methodology and in quality. A typical independent study generally involves a set reading schedule tied to a series of papers or other written assignments. A discussion component may or may not be part of the mix, and the frequency of meetings between faculty and students is not specified. There is little tradition in institutions of higher education of qualitative oversight of independent study instruction. This is not to say that an independent study cannot be a valuable academic experience, but it is one of the few instructional modes in the university curriculum that is left mostly to its own devices.

A tutorial is a different sort of instructional entity. First, tutorials are much more structured than independent studies. They meet at least once a week for at least 50 minutes. Tutors are expected to provide tutees with clear expectations about grading criteria and substantial feedback both written and oral about their progress. Second, each Director of Studies and the Honors Tutorial College exercise quality control over tutorial instruction. Tutors critique the work of their tutees through narrative descriptions and evaluations. Tutees are encouraged (but not required) to comment on the performance of their tutors through the use of an evaluative instrument. These evaluations are not shared directly with the tutor, but by the choice of the tutee are either read by his Director of Studies and the Dean, or only by the Dean. Tutors who do not fulfill their responsibilities do not conduct tutorials in subsequent quarters.

A tutorial is fundamentally a *conversation* continued over the course of ten weeks in which a student and the tutor explore issues and ideas that are fundamental to a specified disciplinary area. The tutorial becomes a vehicle in which the tutor and tutee(s) move through the academic landscape of a particular subject. As with any substantive conversation detours are likely and expected.\* What might begin as a tutorial on the history of the Irish Republican Army might morph into one on the role of martyrdom in political struggles.

Through these conversations tutees gain important fundamental knowledge, hone essential skills, and begin to develop an understanding of what inspires them. In order for the conversation to be meaningful, tutees are given substantial reading assignments and are often asked to complete papers, design projects, or undertake problem sets as a means of demonstrating their growing mastery of the material being studied.

**FAQ:** What is the level of expectation that tutors have for their tutees?

**FAA:** The level of expectation is high. To be more specific, the degree of involvement and hard work that may earn you an "A" in a traditional class will not do the trick in a tutorial: here tutors anticipate exceptional application and effort. In particular, they want to see clear signs of a commitment to intellectual exploration and growth. HTC students should not shy away from taking a risk in order to make a creative, original contribution to their discipline. As long as you are honestly and intelligently engaged there is room for "splendid mistakes" in the tutorial system. The history of both arts and sciences demonstrates that it is often "splendid mistakes" that provide the most interesting developments. The Honors Tutorial College recognizes that stumbling into new turf rather than choosing the safest pathway is an important way to facilitate intellectual growth.

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\* The nature of the material to be mastered in many of the natural sciences sometimes limits the degree of topical flexibility on the part of a tutor particularly in the first two years of a program of study. Nevertheless, the necessity of insuring that a tutee understands certain subjects does not require that all elements of a conversation be limited to the material that must be covered. The beauty of learning science through the tutorial method is that underlying theories, unsolved problems, and developing research can be explored as a tutee works through fundamentals with her tutors.

**FAQ:** What is the fundamental difference between the type of honors education offered at other universities and an Honors Tutorial College education?

**FAA:** In most other honors colleges, you generally are given the opportunity to take special honors seminars or to take honors sections of designated courses. These courses tend to supplement or enrich the standard undergraduate offerings which form the primary component of a typical honors student's course of study. Some honors colleges also offer the opportunity to take a few tutorials during the course of an undergraduate career. In the Honors Tutorial College, the foundation of your education is the tutorial. It is not a luxury good, but is the common coin of the realm.

Being an Honors Tutorial student means that you do not have to depend upon the vagaries of what a professor might want to teach during a particular academic semester or quarter. Your tutorial will be directly relevant to the fundamental knowledge and/or skills that you must master in your discipline.

Honors seminars and honors sections limit the number of students that can enroll, but even so, in most other honors colleges the numbers rarely drop below 20. The Honors Tutorial College puts a premium on consistent, individualized contact with tenure-track faculty members from the first quarter of your freshmen year until graduation. Consequently even in group tutorials, the number of participants rarely tops five.

**FAQ:** Does the Honors Tutorial College allow students to design their own majors?

**FAA:** No, but it does in most cases provide flexibility. Each program of study has a set of courses and/or academic expectations which students are required to complete prior to graduation. The number and nature of these requirements varies widely between programs of study. Nevertheless, because Honors Tutorial College students are not subject to the university's general education requirements (with the dual exception of Freshmen Composition and Junior Composition [both of which can be waived under certain circumstances] ) there is a tremendous amount of freedom within your schedule to take a wide array of courses. Being an Honors Tutorial College student does not lessen the responsibility you owe to yourself to become a broadly educated person. The difference lies in the fact that you do not have to round out your course of study by picking from a proscribed list of courses. You decide which realms to explore.

**FAQ:** Is the educational system used by the Honors Tutorial College based on the tutorial system developed over the course of centuries in Oxford and Cambridge Universities?

**FAA:** Indeed it is. We let them do the hard work of putting together this system, and then when it reached the pinnacle of perfection we borrowed it and transplanted it in America. The two systems, however, are not identical. For the most part, at Oxford or Cambridge a single individual tends to serve as your tutor throughout the course of your academic career. In the Honors Tutorial College, the preferred method is to have a series of different tutors. Our method of proceeding does not preclude having a faculty member as a tutor for more than one tutorial, but the rationale for having multiple tutors is to provide broad exposure to different areas of expertise and disciplinary approaches. Despite the differences between the two approaches, HTC students who have studied at Oxford or Cambridge have felt right at home.