

FEATURE

The 4C Honors Framework: Defining Features for Advanced Coursework in Secondary Schools

Emily Lynne Mofield, EdD¹ 

Abstract: Honors classes in secondary schools are designed to provide advanced learning opportunities for both identified gifted students and high-potential students. They also serve as a bridge to AP/IB classes or other advanced coursework. Beyond preparing students for future courses, honors classes can play a role in talent development by supporting students in engaging in disciplinary thinking and progressing towards expertise in specific domains. Distinguishing between honors and standards courses is essential for district leaders, curriculum specialists, and teachers to design differentiated advanced learning experiences. Without a structured framework, the rigor and expectations for honors courses may vary significantly, limiting the effectiveness and value of honors classes. This article introduces the 4C Honors framework that includes advanced content, complexity, critical and creative reasoning, and context/transfer with student inquiry driving all components. The article includes considerations for intentional program design, implementation, and evaluation of secondary honors courses.

Keywords: curriculum, differentiation, instructional strategies, talent development, gifted education, program evaluation

Honors courses are key components of a continuum of gifted services to address advanced academic needs (e.g., Colangelo

et al., 2004; Florida Department of Education, 2019; Tennessee Department of Education, 2018a). Many gifted students often opt for honors courses, assuming they offer additional challenge and enhanced preparation for

college coursework. However, it is important to consider the extent to which honors courses indeed offer more rigorous, challenging learning experiences in comparison to standard-level classes. As demonstrated in a study by VanTassel-Baska et al. (2020), educators who taught gifted students (as part of regular education curriculum or specialized programs such as honors classes) did not necessarily provide instruction that supports students' analysis, inquiry, critical thinking, and creative thinking. This was especially noted among middle school classrooms. The issue regarding how honors classes

sometimes exist "in name only" without a true distinction in rigor is discussed on blog posts and opinion articles (e.g., Mofield, nd; Peters, 2023), highlighting the need for clear indicators of advanced-level learning. Without a defined framework, teachers are left on their own to differentiate honors from standard courses, often resulting in minor differences such as moving through the curriculum faster or assigning extra projects. However, these courses should not include "more" and "faster" work (an issue noted with these courses for decades) (Feldhusen & Robinson, 1986); they should focus on deeper engagement with the discipline as means of developing advanced talent (Kettler, 2016).

“DISTRICT LEADERS
MIGHT CONSIDER
THE EXTENT TO WHICH
AP, IB, AND DUAL
ENROLLMENT OUTCOMES
IMPROVE IN RELATION TO
CLEARLY ARTICULATED
HONORS CURRICULUM.”

DOI: 10.1177/10762175251352237. From ¹Lipscomb University. Address correspondence to: Emily Lynne Mofield, Lipscomb University, EdD, College of Education, 1 University Park Dr, Nashville, TN 37204, USA. Email: emily.mofield@lipscomb.edu.

For Article reuse guidelines, please visit SAGE's Web site at sagepub.com/journals-permissions

© The Author(s) 2025.

For honors courses to be defensible, they should clearly demonstrate what makes the learning more in-depth and challenging. Therefore, the goal of this article is to present a framework that educators and leaders can apply to differentiating honors from standards courses. The components of the framework incorporate advanced/accelerated curriculum with disciplinary thinking and student inquiry to provide district leaders and teachers of honors courses guidance on developing clearly differentiated curricula and advanced syllabi. The framework aligns to talent development by emphasizing the cultivation of expertise in specific content domains (Subotnik et al., 2011).

Purposes of Honors Courses

The historical literature describes that honors classes have been a part of secondary high schools since the mid-20th century with an aim to offer a carefully articulated set of courses that promote understanding of the methodologies specific to academic disciplines (Cohen, 1966). Modeled after honors programs in colleges and universities, honors courses were created to provide more rigorous learning experiences for high-achieving students.

Within the context of gifted education, honors courses are positioned within gifted program models as a way to challenge and extend gifted students' learning beyond the regular curriculum. This aligns directly to the talent development paradigm (Subotnik et al., 2011) which emphasizes the role of gifted education (including special classes such as honors) is to "assist in the critical transition of general ability into specific talent areas, to cultivate motivation and provide appropriate opportunities" (National Association for Gifted Children, 2015, p. 8). Therefore, honors courses can play an important role in developing students' domain-specific strengths and talents by exposing them to advanced content, accelerated learning, and enrichment through challenging curricula that introduce how to use the tools of inquiry within a field. These courses can serve as opportunities for students to explore and develop disciplinary thinking in areas of study that may be budding areas of interest or to further refine their skills, advancing them in their next steps of the development of talent.

From the lens of meeting the needs of advanced students, honors courses are intended to provide more challenging, in-depth learning experiences where the intensity and rigor match the level of challenge needed for a student to continue to progress in their learning. This happens in the "zone of proximal development," the "sweet spot" for learning where students are challenged to grow with support (Vygotsky, 1978). While many gifted programs offer cluster classes or pull-out programs in elementary school, as students enter middle and high

school, they transition to other models of services such as "honors" or advanced special classes to accelerate or enrich their learning. Therefore, clear criteria should be delineated to ensure that students are indeed experiencing a differentiated advanced curriculum.

Honors courses are not just offered to identified gifted students; they are usually offered to a diverse group of students from a wide range of aptitudes, with the assumption that students who take honors courses are entering with advanced readiness levels. In following, honors courses are opportunities for many high-potential students to access advanced learning experiences. Furthermore, as educators and district leaders seek to answer the question, "How can we increase equitable access to AP/IB classes?" they must recognize that access alone is not enough. Students must be set up for success in these courses, which require intentional and thoughtful preparation. This leads to another important question, "How can we prepare students for the rigorous work of AP/IB classes?" The answer involves looking closely at the rigor of honors classes to ensure they offer the level of challenge they purport to offer as well as the extent to which they offer instructional supports to prepare students with the cognitive demands of advanced work. Honors classes can serve as a bridge to prepare students for AP/IB not just by accelerating content but by explicitly developing the habits of mind and cognitive skills necessary for success in advanced coursework.

Though most of the research literature on honors classes are from college-level honors programs, a few historical studies shed light on honors classes in secondary schools, showing favorable outcomes. For example, survey results from Feldhusen and Kennedy (1989) indicated that teachers perceive both motivational and learning benefits for gifted students in honors classes. Multiple studies on ability grouping also indicate that students in advanced specialized classes show academic gains (see meta-analysis from Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016). More recently, VanTassel-Baska et al. (2020) studied how teachers differentiate for gifted students by observing 329 classrooms from various class types (elementary, middle school, and high school; cluster groups, honors, AP, IB, regular core) and content areas. In a discussion of a sub-analysis of their findings (VanTassel-Baska & Hubbard, 2019), they noted, "advanced learner needs were addressed more frequently and effectively in honors classes that used differentiated curricula. AP and IB program syllabi, used by trained teachers, provided advanced and enriched instruction for advanced learners in relevant classrooms" (p. 3). This suggests that having a well-articulated set of learning experiences within an established differentiated curriculum (or syllabi) can facilitate how teachers employ critical thinking, creative thinking, and analysis and inquiry strategies.

Without a clear framework for how Honors classes are differentiated from standard classes, teachers may default to covering content at a fast pace rather than guiding students through a deep understanding of content. Other times, there is an element of “faux rigor” where students are assigned more or extra work rather than opportunities for deeper learning. This is a proverbial problem with differentiation for gifted students when work is just “extra” and not meaningful to the learner (Tomlinson, 2017). Some states, such as North Carolina, have developed an Honors Level Course Guide with advanced learning indicators to ensure honors level courses are implemented consistently (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023). These indicators include acceleration, differentiated teaching methods, enrichment, and extension of standards, reflective of best practices in curriculum design for gifted students (National Association for Gifted Children, 2019; Weber & Mofield, 2024). Situating these indicators within a cohesive framework that clearly define “in-depth” learning and talent development can help teachers elevate learning in a way that is distinct from standard courses.

Program Design Lens for Honors Classes

A comprehensive program design for serving gifted students includes a spectrum of services for gifted students. Because honors courses are one way to address advanced learning needs within a continuum of services, honors course design should include established goals and linkages between what is provided at the district level to state standards as well as gifted program goals. Eckert and Robins (2017) recommend the following guiding questions for improving a comprehensive program design:

1. Who is being served?
2. How are students identified?
3. What program model is used?
4. What types of learning opportunities?
5. Where are services provided?
6. When are services provided? (p. 63)

Though these questions can guide overall gifted programming, districts can use many of these questions as a starting place to evaluate and improve honors courses. The following section will explore how these specific questions apply to designing honors courses aligned to district goals and standards while providing meaningful challenge for advanced learners.

In this article, it is assumed that the “who” being served includes a broad population of students, including both identified gifted students and other students who show high potential in a specific content area. In regard to answering question 2, “how are students identified?”, districts may consider how to expand access to advanced

coursework. Honors course eligibility often includes teacher recommendations, standardized test scores, and GPA with the intent of ensuring students are prepared for the challenging curriculum in honors courses. However, in efforts to increase equitable access to advanced pathways, many districts offer self-selection or an open enrollment approach to advanced coursework, steering away from “gatekeeping” criteria that close opportunities for students (see Hirschl & Smith, 2023).

With open enrollment, more students have an opportunity to experience high-level learning, and if they are successful in one honors course, this may encourage students who may have otherwise not considered advanced coursework to continue to pursue future challenging courses (including AP/IB) through high school. Some students may need scaffolded supports to ensure they can engage with advanced coursework successfully. These are temporary supports that can help a student build confidence and persist through challenges. Scaffolds might include graphic organizers, visual aids, prompts, or other “on the spot” hints that support a student in mastering content independently (Council of Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center, 2021; Kennedy et al., 2021). In the context of honors courses, this might include guided questions for reading complex texts, sentence stems for constructing arguments, and structured models for problem solving, allowing advanced learning in honors courses to be challenging and attainable.

Question 3, “What type of program model is used?” must be considered in the overall gifted program. Where do honors courses fit with program models? Are the honors classes considered a Tier 2 level within an MTSS model? Are honors classes part of a pathway towards specialized programs like AP and IB? Do honors classes serve within an acceleration model as part of a pathway towards dual enrollment courses? Perhaps the answer is all the above. Nevertheless, it is important to consider how honors courses fit within a continuum of services for gifted students and align to broader program goals.

What types of learning experiences are offered in honors classes? This is the key question and focus of the present article. The 4C Honors framework described next illustrates several ways learning experiences are differentiated from standard classes. District leaders should also consider where and when these services are provided within the scope of students’ learning progressions towards AP and IB courses or preparation for more advanced future coursework.

Key Components and Features of the 4C Honors Framework

What types of learning opportunities should honors courses provide? The framework for honors courses

Table 1. 4C Honors Framework: Features and Inquiry Frames.

Component	Features	Inquiry Frames
Content		
Advanced content knowledge	• Accelerated content • Above grade-level (or next-level) standards • Extended content beyond standards • Advanced concepts • Advanced materials and resources • Elevated standards • Engaging with experts in the field	• How do experts build on this knowledge? • What is still not known?
Complexity		
Layered dimensions	• Connections and patterns among multiple concepts • Interactions of concepts • Multiple elements, perspectives, variables, and factors of influence	• How do these concepts interact and how does this enhance our understanding of the topic/issue/system? • How do multiple factors, elements, or perspectives influence the topic/issue/system?
Critical & creative reasoning		
Disciplinary Thinking	• Thinking, writing, and creating as a “disciplinarian” • Critical reasoning (evaluation, argument construction, analysis) • Creative reasoning (flexible, divergent, generative thinking)	• How do disciplinarians reason about these concepts? • How do experts understand and solve problems with these concepts? • What are new ways of thinking about these concepts (perspective-taking, flexibility, innovation)?
Context		
Learning transfer	• Connections to other contexts through macroconcepts, themes, generalizations, and principles • Interdisciplinary (breadth of content) • Development of authentic products • Applying learning to novel contexts	• How can these ideas be applied to creating an authentic product to address an issue or problem? • How do these ideas transfer to other contexts?

outlined here serves as a foundation for selecting curriculum materials, incorporating effective resources, and applying strategies that encourage students to investigate problems deeply and synthesize their learning. Table 1 shows the key components, features that define the components, and inquiry frames within the 4C Honors framework. The inquiry frames are written from a student lens to position the learner as an active investigator, pursuing meaningful exploration and learning.

When these elements are applied to instructional planning, honors courses can move beyond simply

covering content at a faster pace and instead provide richer opportunities for talent development, especially with an emphasis towards developing expertise in content domains. These elements elevate student inquiry by positioning it as the central force that drives deeper engagement and exploration. Student inquiry is not just one component of the model; it is the central force that drives the learner to apply their construction of advanced knowledge to novel contexts. Honors courses should include whenever possible opportunities for students to explore, develop, and deepen their interests in a talent domain where they investigate problems, work with

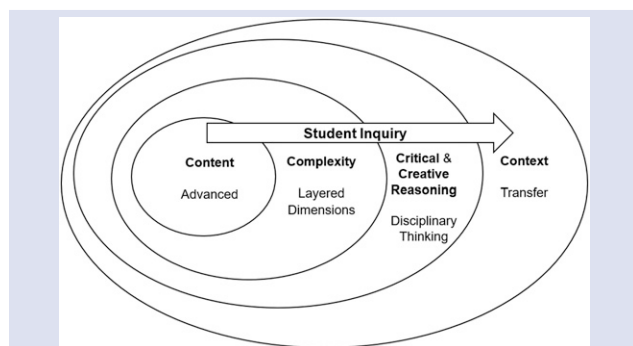


Figure 1. 4C Honors Framework.

mentors, and engage in authentic research (Kettler & Puryear, 2016).

As shown in Figure 1, the 4C features overlap. When students are grappling with advanced content, there is more opportunity to explore the complexities of this content. Engaging in critical and creative reasoning and exploring complexity can happen simultaneously. Students apply their disciplinary thinking in authentic tasks and products when they transfer learning to other contexts. Advanced content is the center circle because it is the core distinguishing feature of honors classes. The advanced content, exploration of extended concepts, and use of advanced materials allow for deeper inquiry with complexity, disciplinary thinking, and transfer to other contexts.

All students need to examine connections, apply critical thinking, engage in disciplinary literacy, and create authentic products. In honors courses, students enter with more advanced readiness levels, though the range of readiness is likely to vary. Nevertheless, the expectation is that they engage with more advanced content and cognitive challenges. As a result, honors-level coursework should begin at a more advanced point on a continuum of learning. Since every student has a next step in learning, students in honors courses should engage in tasks that require a higher level of cognitive demand.

Content: Advanced Content Knowledge

In designing an honors course, it should be clear how the content is “advanced.” Questions to consider include: How does the content extend beyond the regular curriculum? What advanced concepts can be explored? During the planning process, considerations should be made for using advanced resources, advanced texts, and above-grade level standards. For example, in an honors Geometry course, students may explore more advanced geometry concepts such as fractal geometry or graph theory. Curriculum textbooks and guides often provide ideas for extensions and tools for enrichment and

exploration, yet they are often not adequate in providing advanced content, opportunities for student-driven inquiry, or appropriate challenge needed to support advanced learners. When evaluating these resources, educators must consider the extent to which they allow students to explore concepts in a way that prepares them to think as mathematicians (e.g., researching how geometry comes to life in advanced fields like engineering or computer graphics, engaging in mathematical modeling projects). Curriculum specialists and teachers who are well-versed in criteria for honors courses such as those outlined in the 4C Honors framework can vet these materials for the level of rigor and alignment. A rubric is included in Table 2 illustrating how criteria can be used to evaluate the extent to which syllabi, curriculum units, and/or pacing guides align to components of the framework.

Because courses are often designed around standards, the honors course should clearly show how students engage with advanced materials to reach those standards. Other approaches include creating “elevated” versions of the grade-level standards to clearly delineate how the elevated standard extends learning beyond the regular curriculum. In regard to advanced content, Table 3 shows an example of how a state standard for Drama is elevated to extend learning beyond the regular curriculum.

The goal is to provide a way to build an advanced understanding of the concepts and principles offered within the course. Building advanced content knowledge aligns with guiding students’ development of expertise in the content area so that students are grappling with “next level” concepts and are exposed to more advanced methodologies and tools within a field. One way to support students in accessing expert-level knowledge is through integrating experiences with experts, professionals, and mentors in the field. Professionals can share insights about how they apply and use the advanced content in their own work and guide students in developing a deeper understanding of the discipline.

Complexity: Layered Dimensions

In honors course development, complexity involves students examining multiple connections, multiple perspectives, and interrelationships between and among concepts. For example, students might explore additional texts or content sources for comparison, or they might study the interrelationships or interactions among key concepts. Table 3 illustrates how complexity is embedded within an honors environmental science course, emphasizing how students study the *interactions* of multiple elements. While all students need opportunities to explore and apply concepts in a meaningful way, the component of complexity allows

Table 2. Honors Course Evaluation Rubric.

Criteria	Exemplary	Proficient	Developing	Needs Improvement
Advanced content knowledge	The course integrates advanced, accelerated, and above-grade-level content with next-level standards. Students engage with extended concepts, advanced resources, and experts in the field.	The course includes advanced content and accelerated pacing, with extended learning opportunities.	The course supports grade-level standards with extended learning opportunities.	The course follows grade-level standards.
Complexity & layered dimensions	The curriculum includes opportunities for students to analyze layered dimensions of content, exploring interrelationships across multiple concepts, systems, and/or perspectives.	The curriculum includes opportunities for students to explore patterns and examine multiple connections among concepts.	The curriculum offers opportunities for students to examine relationships among concepts.	The curriculum focuses on isolated concepts.
Critical & creative reasoning	The curriculum includes opportunities for students to engage in disciplinary thinking, applying critical reasoning (analysis, evaluation, argumentation), and creative reasoning (divergent, flexible thinking) in meaningful ways. Assignments mirror professional-level reasoning in the field.	The curriculum includes opportunities for students to engage in disciplinary thinking, applying critical (analysis, evaluation, and argumentation) and creative reasoning (divergent, flexible thinking) in tasks and assignments. Assignments include opportunities for students to explain their thinking.	The curriculum includes opportunities for critical (analysis, evaluation, argumentation) or creative reasoning (divergent, flexible thinking). Assignments include opportunities for students to explain their thinking.	The curriculum primarily focuses on factual recall, terminology, or procedural steps (e.g., defining terms, listing facts, identifying features). Assignments involve answering closed-ended questions or single correct answers. Student responses show a focus on accuracy of information rather than reasoning.
Context & learning transfer	The curriculum includes opportunities for students to apply knowledge to novel contexts through macroconcepts, interdisciplinary learning, and authentic product development. Instructional emphasis is placed on generalizations,	The curriculum integrates content from multiple disciplines to explore broad themes or ideas. Students engage in real-world applications through structured tasks.	The curriculum includes isolated interdisciplinary references (e.g., a history-related example in a literature unit).	The curriculum emphasizes discrete content knowledge, discipline-specific facts, skills, and procedures.

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	themes, and real-world applications.			
Student inquiry	The course provides opportunities for student-driven inquiry through self-directed questions, exploration of complex ideas, and authentic tasks (e.g., Socratic seminars, debates, research). Inquiry supports autonomy, metacognition, and expert-level reasoning.	Inquiry is embedded throughout the course, with opportunities for student-driven exploration and topic selection. Autonomy and critical thinking are encouraged.	Inquiry is present but guided throughout the course. Students engage with teacher-directed questions and tasks.	Learning is teacher-directed throughout the course.

Note. Rubric created with ChatGPT-40, using content from 4C Framework and modified by the author (OpenAI, 2025). [Prompt: (Attached framework). Please create a rubric with the features of the 4C Honors framework that can be used by district leaders, curriculum specialists, and teachers for evaluating the extent to which Honors course curriculum aligns with each component].

for a more nuanced exploration of concepts. As students make connections and examine patterns, they strengthen their mental models of how these concepts interact, developing a more sophisticated understanding of the content.

Critical & Creative Reasoning: Disciplinary Thinking

Reasoning within a discipline encompasses both critical and creative thinking. This component presents an opportunity for students to explore real-world problems in inquiry-based learning experiences. Problem-based learning and other open-ended tasks are excellent opportunities to embed critical reasoning with an emphasis on developing ways to think and problem-solve from the lens of the discipline. Research demonstrates that students who engage in inquiry-focused experiences such as problem-based learning show enhanced engagement and discipline-specific content knowledge (Gallagher & Gallagher, 2013). Other specific inquiry models can be used to teach reasoning skills. For example, Paul's Elements of Reasoning (Paul & Elder, 2019) and Cambridge's taxonomy of critical thinking (Black et al., 2008) are critical thinking models that can be used to guide students' inquiry in various content areas. Creative processes including flexible thinking, perspective-taking, elaboration, development of multiple solutions, and synthesis of ideas are also important ways of reasoning within this component.

Kettler et al.'s (2018) Taxonomy of Creative Thinking can be useful in planning student expectations for engaging in idea generation, idea elaboration, idea connections, problem solving, and original work. Additionally, Hess's domain-specific matrices (Hess, 2018) are useful for planning for deeper learning with both critical and creative reasoning as this model merges Bloom's Taxonomy with Depth of Knowledge categories (Webb, 1997).

All students should engage in high levels of thinking, including analyzing, evaluating, and creating. In the honors course, however, the emphasis should be on how these high-level processes are applied and integrated to advanced content so that students engage deeply with the discipline. Table 3 shows an example of critical reasoning and complexity in an honors civics course. The honors course shows how students examine a problem through evaluating multiple strategies and consequences which mirror the disciplinary thinking of civic leadership.

Context: Learning Transfer

In honors courses, there should be an emphasis on providing opportunities for students to make connections within and across disciplines. In Hattie et al.'s (2017) model for deep learning, learning transfer happens when students apply their knowledge flexibly to new contexts. Again, all students should have opportunities to make interdisciplinary connections and apply their learning to real-world problems, but in

Table 3. Differentiated Examples: Standards vs. Honors Courses.

	Standards Course	Honors Course
Advanced content	State standard (Drama): “Investigate and justify multiple perspectives and solutions to staging problems in a theatrical work” (Tennessee Department of Education, 2018b, p. 81).	Elevated standard (Drama): Investigate and justify staging solutions by integrating historical, cultural, and technical influences, evaluating their impact on audience engagement and the artist's intent.
Complexity	Students investigate the relationships between animal structures and physiological processes, highlighting the adaptations that facilitate survival, growth, behavior, and reproduction (task aligned with SC.HSP.6.1.F; Nebraska Department of Education, 2017).	Students focus more on the <i>interactions</i> of multiple factors including how environmental changes, genetic variations, and ecological relationships influence adaptations.
Critical & creative reasoning	Students investigate two real-world examples through case studies that highlight the impact of local government initiatives on communities.	Students investigate two real-world examples through case studies that highlight the impact of local government initiatives on communities and consider the underlying drivers of decision-making processes, the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement strategies, and the consequences for diverse community groups.
Context/Transfer	Students research environmental issues and create a sustainability plan for their community. They analyze local data and propose realistic solutions for the community.	Students research various sustainability models (e.g., net-zero designs, regenerative designs, smart cities) and develop solutions that can be adapted to communities in the local region. They produce a comparative analysis of the strategies applied in the different communities with various levels of economic and environmental constraints.

honors courses, an additional emphasis on abstract concepts, principles, theories, and universal themes with advanced content elevates the level of learning and transfer.

The learning transfer dimension is informed by the other elements of the framework (advanced content, layered complexity, critical and creative reasoning) and provides an opportunity for students to develop an authentic product with real-world relevance. The development of the authentic product requires students to apply disciplinary tools and expert-level resources (content), encourages students to consider how multiple elements shape the product or performance (complexity), and requires students to justify decisions

and think about issues through the lens of an expert (critical and creative reasoning/disciplinary thinking). Table 3 shows that the development of authentic products and transfer happen in both standard and honors courses, but the advanced exploration of concepts, complexity, and level of critical reasoning are elevated in the honors course.

Student Inquiry as a Driver

Within this framework, student inquiry drives how students engage in the learning process. As students interact with honors-level curriculum, the inquiry process provides opportunities for active exploration of

advanced content with complexity, critical and creative reasoning, and opportunities to transfer learning to new contexts. Students explore their own questions as they engage with advanced texts, consider their own hypotheses for why concepts interact in the way they do (complexity), question assumptions, reason, and apply flexible thinking as experts would, and self-direct their learning in the development of authentic performances or products. Socratic seminars, debates, research investigations, and problem-based learning are examples of inquiry-based experiences that encompass all components of the framework. Student inquiry also invites opportunities for metacognitive reflection, encouraging students to become aware of their thinking processes and evaluate multiple solution paths. As stated before, this is not just one “part” of the framework, but a thread through all the dimensions, promoting autonomy and meaningful exploration in learning. Student inquiry in honors courses should offer students opportunities to self-select topics and issues for deeper study, opening doors to ask meaningful questions, pursue their interests, engage in research, and take ownership of their learning.

Alignment of 4C Honors Framework to Gifted Education Models

The elements of the 4C Honors framework are linked to curriculum foundations in the field of gifted education, specifically the Integrated Curriculum Model (ICM; VanTassel-Baska, 1986) which emphasizes advanced content, process/product, and concept/issues. The ICM has been an influential model for developing gifted curriculum including units developed from the College of William and Mary (see VanTassel-Baska, 2018) and Vanderbilt Programs for Talented Youth (see Stambaugh & Mofield, 2022).

The advanced content element of the 4C Honors framework is derived directly from the advanced content dimension from the ICM, emphasizing knowledge acquisition through sophisticated resources to facilitate disciplinary thinking. Next, the process-product dimension of the ICM emphasizes high-order thinking and application of high-level processing in creating a product to demonstrate essential understanding. In the 4C Honors framework, this high-level processing applied to product creation is aligned to complexity and critical and creative reasoning. Further, complexity in the 4C framework is grounded in how others have defined it as differentiation features for gifted curriculum. VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh (2006) defined complexity as “additional variables, multiple resources, or more difficult questions” (p. 810) and Stambaugh and Mofield (2022) operationalize it as “add a variable and examine the

relationships or connections.” The idea of “complexity” is also reflected in Kaplan’s thinking tools as students examine patterns, trends, and issues (Kaplan, 2017). Additionally, the critical and creative thinking processes are intertwined as learners consider, “how do experts in the field engage with these ideas? How do experts in the field reason, analyze and solve problems?” Thinking like a disciplinarian is a hallmark of gifted curriculum as it relates to several curriculum models (e.g., the ICM by VanTassel-Baska (1986); the Purdue Three-Stage Model by Feldhusen & Koloff (1986); the Grid by Kaplan (2009); the Parallel Curriculum Model by Tomlinson et al. (2009); the Multiple Menu Model by Renzulli et al. (2000)).

Last, the concept-issues dimension of the ICM, which includes connections to big ideas and themes across a unit of study, links directly to Context/Transfer. These connections to big ideas allow students to apply their learning to solve real-world problems and create authentic products that reflect transfer. Taken together, the advanced content, process/product, and concept dimensions of the ICM are refined and expanded upon in the 4C Honors framework with outlined criteria specific for secondary honors courses.

Implementing the 4C Honors Framework

When a framework is clearly articulated, it can be used to plan for student learning by guiding curriculum planning and the selection of instructional materials, strategies, and assessments. The following questions are recommended to guide a full implementation of defensible honors courses:

1. What are the goals of honors courses?
2. What are the intended outcomes for students?
3. How might the honors framework be communicated to parents, students, teachers, and administrators?
4. What support do teachers need to provide advanced learning opportunities for students in honors courses?
5. How do honors courses link to state standards and NAGC gifted programming standards? How do they prepare students for next-level courses (e.g., AP/IB courses)?
6. How will the success of honors courses be measured?

Articulating Goals

It is important to clearly articulate and communicate these goals so that the expectations are known and understood by all stakeholders. Input from teachers, district leaders, gifted specialists, parents, and students are needed in developing goal-consensus. Examples of goals

for honors courses are offered here, though some honors programs extend beyond an academic focus to leadership development. The focus on such goals should be based on local needs and viewpoints reflecting values, expectations, and educational priorities of the community.

- Prepare students for advanced learning by bridging the gap between grade-level instruction and advanced courses (e.g., AP courses, IB, dual enrollment).
- Develop reasoning, skills, and intellectual habits necessary for success in advanced coursework and college courses.
- Develop talent within a specific content area by providing opportunities for students to engage with advanced content, methodologies of the discipline, and opportunities for independent learning and research.
- Provide learning within a student's zone of proximal development where students are pushed beyond their current skill level while still receiving necessary support.

Establishing Intended Student Outcomes

Intended student outcomes can be developed as they align to the 4C Honors framework. For example, student outcomes may include:

- (Content): Engage with above-grade-level materials and concepts and ideas that extend beyond the regular curriculum.
- (Complexity): Analyze multiple elements and features of advanced concepts, studying the interactions, patterns, and trends of these ideas.
- (Critical/Creative Reasoning): Think and problem-solve like an expert in the field of study, applying discipline-specific methodologies to reason through problems and issues.
- (Context): Apply knowledge to novel situations by synthesizing information and creating authentic products to address issues.
- (Student inquiry): Pursue self-selected topics and questions within the course for deeper exploration.

These intended student outcomes serve as a foundation for designing curriculum, learning experiences, and assessment of student learning, ensuring that instruction and student learning align to the elevated expectations in honors courses. As students achieve these outcomes, differentiation to respond to the needs of a variety of learner profiles may be needed. Pursuing independent projects, choosing a specific topic or concept to study more deeply, and investigating learner-driven questions are opportunities for differentiated learning experiences.

Communication

Communication of an honors framework is essential to ensure a shared understanding of what is required in these courses. Without this clarity, students might make assumptions that taking an honors course simply means there is an extra project they will do, they will be one lesson ahead of the standard course, or that they will get an extra weighted point for GPA calculations. Curriculum guides and scope and sequences should clearly articulate how honors courses are different from standard courses by using elements of the framework as key criteria. In the honors course syllabus, a teacher may highlight specific examples in which the 4 C's are evident within the course. As parents and students make decisions about enrolling in honors courses, reviewing the syllabus in advance provides clarity on the course expectation and brings a shared understanding about the level of rigor and challenge involved.

Supporting Teachers

As with any implementation of gifted curriculum, teachers need ongoing support in professional learning. As noted in literature (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2020), teachers need opportunities to understand how differentiation features for instructing advanced students are operationalized in teaching and learning. Words such as complexity, disciplinary thinking, critical reasoning, and creative thinking need to be explicitly defined and illustrated with content-specific examples. Additionally, Weber and Mofield (2023) describe the importance of preparing teachers with pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) as they teach advanced content. This includes both the teaching strategies directly tied to teaching a specific content area along with teaching the advanced concepts and discipline-specific methodologies. For example, in teaching history, a teacher would use instructional strategies such as investigating historical questions using both primary and secondary sources, understanding causation, and recognizing assumptions in historical narratives. Teachers may also benefit from well-defined pacing guides with examples of advanced materials, texts, and resources. While published curriculum resources often include extended learning opportunities, the 4C framework can serve as a tool to evaluate whether these opportunities truly reflect the level of challenge, complexity, critical thinking, and connection expected in honors or advanced instruction.

Building Links

Honors courses should align to state standards, though the way in which students learn and master the standards are different in honors courses. As previously mentioned, students may engage with advanced resources and materials and explore advanced concepts that extend learning beyond the standard. Another

approach is to elevate the standard itself by incorporating more advanced processing (complexity, critical/creative reasoning, disciplinary thinking) and learning transfer. Curriculum guidance documents should clearly show how students engage with standards by incorporating elements of the 4Cs. Additionally, honors courses can be aligned to many of the National Association for Gifted (NAGC) programming standards, particularly those related to curriculum planning and instruction (Standard 3), learning environments (Standard 4), and programming (Standard 5) (NAGC, 2019).

To provide a clear pathway to future advanced coursework, district leaders and curriculum specialists should align honors courses to AP, IB, or dual enrollment courses through articulated crosswalks. Working from a backwards design, it is important to ask, “What skills are needed for students to be successful in this AP/IB course? What content should students be exposed to in honors courses that would build the necessary foundations of learning for this course? What cognitive demands are essential for success in the AP/IB course (e.g., analysis, argument construction)?” This crosswalk can help educators bridge the gap between grade-level standards and more advanced coursework. Identifying the key concepts and cognitive demands needed in future advanced coursework enables educators to intentionally design honors curricula within a cohesive, structured progression.

Measuring Success

As with any program, measuring the extent to which the honors courses are meeting their goals is essential. District leaders might consider the extent to which AP, IB, and dual enrollment outcomes improve in relation to clearly articulated honors curriculum. Other sources of data include the number of honors students enrolling in advanced coursework, performance on AP/IB exams, and other academic performance data (SAT, ACT, PSAT, state assessments). An evaluation of student work samples and portfolios, particularly on performance-based assessments in the honors courses can also be informative to the extent to which students are able to apply critical and creative reasoning, disciplinary thinking, and problem solving related to the content area.

The quality of instruction and implementation can also be measured through curriculum alignment reviews, classroom observations, and focus groups. Asking students if they feel challenged, engaged, and prepared for advanced content will also provide insight into the extent to which students are engaged in meaningful inquiry.

Additionally, district leaders should consider the extent to which students from various demographic backgrounds are participating in honors courses. What structures are in place to support students from diverse backgrounds in succeeding in honors courses? What scaffolds help students from underrepresented groups

persist in honors and advanced courses? Implementing bridge programs during the summer or providing ongoing mentoring could provide students with resources and guidance necessary to succeed in challenging academic settings.

Conclusion

The development and implementation of a clearly defined honors framework is needed to ensure honors classes are defensible. The 4C Honors framework described in this article (Advanced Content, Complexity, Critical & Creative Reasoning, and Context/Transfer) serves as a model for elevating instruction through inquiry-driven learning. When aligned to state standards, AP/IB courses, and best practices within gifted programming, honors courses play a key role in students' development of talent and preparation for future advanced coursework. The framework can serve as a tool to ensure that an honors class offers a differentiated learning experience that is indeed different from standard classes, not just by pace or an extra project, but through more in-depth, meaningful engagement with advanced content. Through intentional program design and continuous evaluation, honors courses can be designed to support students in excelling in advanced academic pursuits and propel them forward in their talent trajectories.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Emily Lynne Mofield  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9884-9576>

References

- Black, B., Chislett, J., Thomson, A., Thwaites, G., & Thwaites, J. (2008). *Critical thinking—A definition and taxonomy for Cambridge Assessment*. Research Matters. <https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/480038-critical-thinking-a-definition-and-taxonomy-for-cambridge-assessment.pdf>
- Cohen, J. W. (1966). *The superior student in American higher education*. McGraw-Hill.

- Colangelo, N., Assouline, S. G., & Gross, M. U. M. (2004). *A nation deceived: How schools hold back America's brightest students* (Vol. 2). The Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development, University of Iowa. https://www.accelerationinstitute.org/Nation_Deceived/ND_v2.pdf
- Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center. (2021). *High-leverage practices for students with disabilities*. <https://highleveragepractices.org/>
- Eckert, R. D., & Robins, J. H. (2017). *Designing services and programs for high-ability learners: A guidebook for gifted education* (2nd ed.). Corwin Press.
- Feldhusen, J. F., & Kennedy, D. M. (1989). Effects of honors classes on secondary students. *Roeper Review*, 11(3), 153–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783198909553193>
- Feldhusen, J. F., & Koloff, M. B. (1986). The Purdue three-stage enrichment model at the elementary level. In J. S. Renzulli (Ed.), *Systems and models for developing programs for the gifted and talented* (pp. 126–152). Creative Learning Press.
- Feldhusen, J. F., & Robinson, A. (1986). The Purdue secondary model for gifted and talented youth. In J. S. Renzulli (Ed.), *Systems and models for developing programs for the gifted and talented* (pp. 153–179). Creative Learning Press.
- Florida Department of Education. (2019). *Resource guide for the education of gifted students in Florida*. <https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/5660/urlt/RGEGSF.pdf>
- Gallagher, S. A., & Gallagher, J. J. (2013). Using problem-based learning to explore unseen academic potential. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning*, 7(1), 112–131. <https://doi.org/10.7771/1541-5015.1322>
- Hattie, J., Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2017). *Visible learning for mathematics: What works best to optimize student learning*. Corwin.
- Hess, K. (2018). *A local assessment toolkit to promote deeper learning: Transforming research into practice*. Corwin.
- Hirschl, N., & Smith, C. M. (2023). Advanced placement gatekeeping and racialized tracking. *Sociology of Education*, 96(3), 190–210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380407231161334>
- Kaplan, S. N. (2009). The Grid: A model to construct differentiated curriculum for the gifted. In J. S. Renzulli, E. J. Gubbins, K. S. McMillen, R. D. Eckert, & C. A. Little (Eds.), *Systems and models for developing programs for the gifted and talented* (pp. 235–249). Creative Learning Press.
- Kaplan, S. N. (2017). Differentiating with depth and complexity. In H. L. Herberg-Davis & C. M. Callahan (Eds.), *Fundamentals of gifted education considering multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 258–267). Taylor & Francis.
- Kennedy, M. J., Hirsch, S. E., Rodgers, W. J., Bruce, A. C., & Lloyd, J. W. (2021). High-leverage practices: Teaching students with disabilities effective instructional strategies. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 53(3), 202–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059920964189>
- Kettler, T. (2016). Curriculum design in an era of ubiquitous information and technology. In T. Kettler (Ed.), *Modern curriculum for gifted and advanced academic students* (pp. 3–21). Prufrock Press.
- Kettler, T., Lamb, K. N., & Mullet, D. R. (2018). *Developing creativity in the classroom: Learning and innovation for 21st-century schools*. Prufrock Press.
- Kettler, T., & Puryear, J. S. (2016). Research experiences for high school students: A curriculum for expertise and authentic practice. In T. Kettler (Ed.), *Modern curriculum for gifted and advanced academic students* (pp. 189–204). Prufrock Press.
- Mofield, E. (n.d.). *What makes honors classes more than a name?* Association for Middle Level Education. <https://www.aml.org/what-makes-honors-classes-more-than-a-name/>
- National Association for Gifted Children. (2015). *Talent development task force report to the board of directors*. https://cdn.ymaws.com/nagc.org/resource/resmgr/knowledge-center/position-statements/Task_Force_Report_TalentDeve.pdf
- National Association for Gifted Children. (2019). *Pre-K–Grade 12 gifted education programming standards*. https://cdn.ymaws.com/nagc.org/resource/resmgr/knowledge-center/nagc_2019_prek-grade_12_gift.pdf
- Nebraska Department of Education. (2017). *Nebraskas college and career ready standards for science*. https://cdn.education.ne.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Nebraska_Science_Standards_Final_10_23.pdf
- North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2023). *Honors level course guide*. <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/documents/advancedlearning/honors-level-course-guide/download?attachment>
- OpenAI. (2025). *ChatGPT-40 (March 31 version) [Large language model]*. <https://chat.openai.com>
- Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2019). *Critical thinking: Tools for taking charge of your learning and your life* (3rd ed.). Pearson.
- Peters, S. (2023, March 28). *Inclusion, equality and 'honors' classes in name only*. The 74 Newsletter. <https://www.the74million.org/article/inclusion-equality-and-honors-classes-in-name-only/>
- Renzulli, J. S., Leppein, J. L., & Hays, T. S. (2000). *The multiple menu model: A practical guide for developing differentiated curriculum*. Prufrock Press.
- Stambaugh, T., & Mofield, E. (2022). *A teachers guide to curriculum design for gifted and advanced learners: Advanced content models for differentiating curriculum*. Routledge.
- Steenbergen-Hu, S., Makel, M. C., & Olszewski-Kubilius, P. (2016). What one hundred years of research says about the effects of ability grouping and acceleration on K–12 students' academic achievement: Findings of two second-order meta-analyses. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 849–899. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316675417>
- Subotnik, R. F., Olszewski-Kubilius, P., & Worrell, F. C. (2011). Rethinking giftedness and gifted education: A proposed direction forward based on psychological science. *Psychological Sciences in the Public Interest*, 12(1), 3–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100611418056>
- Tennessee Department of Education. (2018a). *Intellectually gifted evaluation guidance*. https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/special-education/eligibility/se_intellectually_gifted_evaluation_guidance.pdf
- Tennessee Department of Education. (2018b). *Tennessee fine arts standards*. https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/standards/art/Fine_Arts_Standards.pdf
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2017). *How to differentiate instruction in academically diverse classrooms* (3rd ed.). ASCD.
- Tomlinson, C. A., Kaplan, S. N., Renzulli, J. S., Purcell, J. H., Leppein, J. H., & Burns, D. E. (2009). *The parallel curriculum: A design to develop high potential and challenge high-ability*. Corwin.

- VanTassel-Baska, J. (1986). Effective curriculum and instructional models for talented students. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 30(4), 164–169. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001698628603000404>
- VanTassel-Baska, J. (2018). Achievement unlocked: Effective curriculum interventions with low-income students. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 62(1), 68–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0016986217738565>
- VanTassel-Baska, J., & Hubbard, G. F. (2019, November). *A study of teacher use of differentiation practices in classrooms for gifted learners* [Conference presentation handout]. NAGC 65th Conference, Albuquerque, NM.
- VanTassel-Baska, J., Hubbard, G. F., & Robbins, J. I. (2020). Differentiation of instruction for gifted learners: Collated evaluative studies of teacher classroom practices. *Roeper Review*, 42(3), 153–164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2020.1765919>
- VanTassel-Baska, J., & Stambaugh, T. (2006). *Comprehensive curriculum for gifted learners* (3rd ed.). Allyn & Bacon.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Webb, N. (1997). *Criteria for alignment of expectations and assessments in mathematics and science education* (Research Monograph Number 6). National Institute for Science Education: University of Wisconsin-Madison. Council of Chief State School Officers.
- Weber, C. L., & Mofield, E. L. (2023). Considerations for professional learning supporting teachers of the gifted in pedagogical content knowledge. *Gifted Child Today*, 46(2), 128–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10762175221149258>
- Weber, C. L., & Mofield, E. L. (2024). *LEAP guidebook for curriculum design for teachers of gifted and high-potential students*. National Association for Gifted Children.

Bio

Emily Lynne Mofield, EdD, is an associate professor at Lipscomb University, serving as co-director of the Gifted and Advanced Academics Program. Emily's work focuses on curriculum design, differentiation, psychosocial skills, and collaborative teaching practices in gifted education. Emily regularly consults with school districts on honors course development and has authored or co-authored a number of articles and books in the field, including Vertical Differentiation for Gifted, Advanced, and High-Potential Students: 25 Strategies to Stretch Student Thinking. She has also served in various leadership roles with NAGC and co-developed the LEAP series in Curriculum Design for Gifted Students with Dr. Christine Weber.