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A Blue-Collar Honors Story

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*Well, I guess I was wrong
I just don't belong
But then, I've been there before
Everything's all right
I'll just say goodnight
And I'll show myself to the door
Hey, I didn't mean
To cause a big scene
Just give me an hour and then
Well, I'll be as high
As that ivory tower
That you're livin' in*

—Garth Brooks, “Friends in Low Places”

In “Honors is Elitist, and What’s Wrong with That?” Norm Weiner contemplates definitions and perceptions of elitism, looking specifically at the intersection of academic elitism and socioeconomic elitism in honors education and arguing that honors programs at state schools or smaller private schools are successful at assisting students who are intellectually gifted but economically disadvantaged to “step up the social ladder” toward middle-class careers and values. My own personal and educational experiences exemplify this sentiment, and I sometimes feel as if I could be the poster child for socioeconomic ascendance through honors education—except for the fact that, despite the improvement in my financial standing and job security, I still feel like a blue-collar imposter in white-collar academia.

A descendant of Polish immigrant grandparents, I was born and raised in Granite City, Illinois, a steel-mill town located ten miles northeast of St. Louis, Missouri. My mother, the youngest of five children, graduated from high school in 1954 and started a career in accounts payable, and my father, the youngest of four, left high school one class shy of graduation in 1952, later earning his GED, and worked at various meatpacking and manufacturing plants around the St. Louis area. Only two of their siblings attended college; in fact, my mother’s oldest brother advised his children that college was a waste of both time and money. I am the only person in my immediate

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family to have completed a college degree, and I am the first person in my extended family to have earned a Ph.D.

Throughout my elementary and secondary school years, I was neither conventionally pretty nor athletically skilled, traits highly valued in our small-town culture, but I demonstrated strong academic talents. Having begun elementary school in the 1970s at the nascence of the contemporary gifted education movement, I was routinely challenged intellectually through gifted-program activities, special individual projects, and cross-programming, in which I studied language arts with the next grade up (because of my intense introversion, my mother refused to let the school double promote me). In my junior high and high school honors programs, I excelled academically, maintaining a 5.5 GPA by taking advanced 6-point A core courses, scoring in the 98th percentile on the PSAT, and getting a 31 on the ACT. In theory, my educational future was filled with possibilities, but in reality my family's financial situation dictated some difficult decisions. When I was in high school, my father was laid off from a factory job and was trying to support a family of four on minimum wage as a security guard in East St. Louis, and my mother had stopped working after my younger sister and I were born. While many of my classmates enjoyed access to cars, expensive clothing, trips to Europe, and so forth, my family almost had to sell our house because we needed to pay for utilities and food. During my junior year, however, my mother resolved to go back to work so that she could help pay for me to go to college. Even though I elected to work in the guidance office during my study-hall period, the counselors themselves provided me precious little information or advice about scholarships and grant programs; add that to my extended family's limited experience with college, and my parents and I felt we were on our own regarding college tuition.

Fortunately, while researching programs in my prospective communications major, I found a respected, accredited degree program in mass communications at a local public institution, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, which my high school mathematics department chair uncharitably called "the high school up the road." SIUE's Presidential Scholars Program combined participation in the university honors program with a full scholarship and an assigned honors mentor. When my program application made it to the semifinalist interview stage, my mother's sister helped me buy a new outfit, and their other brother let us borrow his car so that we could drive up to the campus. The day I received my honors acceptance letter still ranks as one of the happiest days of my life.

In addition to alleviating the financial burden my college education would have imposed on my family, my undergraduate honors program provided other equally valuable opportunities I might not have had otherwise.

The honors dean gave me a student work job in the program office, and my honors mentor always had an open door and an understanding ear for me, such as during the summer between my freshman and sophomore years when my father was diagnosed with cancer. The department chair assisted me in crafting my resumé and securing an internship with a top advertising agency in St. Louis, and after I completed my bachelor's degree, an honors English professor helped me return to SIUE for a master's degree and guided me through assistantship applications, first for the school's literary studies journal and then for a teaching assistantship, during which I worked with the writing program administrator and the honors director in designing and teaching a new honors freshman composition course.

Throughout my undergraduate degree, I worked hard at my honors studies, maintaining a 3.79 undergraduate GPA while working a student job and commuting from home, where I was responsible for most household chores while my mother was at work and my father was in and out of the hospital with various cancer-related surgeries and treatments. While I was completing my master's degree, my father passed away, and my honors English professor, with whom I was taking a summer graduate seminar and whose own father had died from colon cancer as well, let me sit in the room with my head down on the desk because I needed to be out of the house. This professor also helped me transform my resumé into a *curriculum vitae* and apply for out-of-state Ph.D. programs, stating that I was the only person he knew whose standard of living would actually improve by moving away to graduate school and having only myself to take care of for a change.

Sixteen years later, I am a tenured associate professor of English and an active member of various national organizations, so I could be considered a successful example of Norm's claim that honors programs help students move up the socioeconomic ladder. Professionally and financially, I am certainly better off than my parents were, but personally, emotionally, on a day-to-day basis, I still frequently feel that I am an outsider. Granted, some of this has nothing to do with social class: for example, I am a liberal, Catholic-raised, midwestern Democrat who lives deep in conservative, evangelical Republican territory. When I travel back home to Illinois, however, my younger sister, who dropped out of college after I moved out of state and is currently working in the auditing department of a large commercial bank in St. Louis, admonishes me not to throw around my professorial vocabulary; in fact, she would probably admonish me for using the word *admonish*. Back at work, I joke that I should not be allowed around money or budgets because (1) I'm an English professor and therefore should not attempt to do math and (2) I have no money of my own with which to practice. The reality is that I grew up in a household that had no investments, no stocks or retirement

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accounts, but rather worried about keeping the lights on and putting food on the table. When my colleagues complain about the state of their 403(b)s or their stock portfolios in the current economy, I tell them that they can cry to me after they've used food stamps and eaten government cheese and powdered milk as I did in high school (perhaps my working-class bluntness is one of Norm's "rough edges" that survived the honors program's latent middle-class polishing).

As an academic with blue-collar roots, I resent the assumption that intellectual achievement is inherently intertwined with access to financial resources that provide private school education and other academic benefits associated with personal wealth, such as the opportunity to travel internationally, to hire private tutors, to participate in expensive summer camp programs, and the like. One of the reasons I support honors education so strongly is that I believe honors programs provide a challenging educational environment for academically talented and motivated students who, for a variety of personal and financial reasons, choose to attend a community college, a small liberal arts school, or a regional public university rather than an ivy or a large Research One university. Over the past three years, for instance, I have taught two honors students who scored 36 on the ACT, and even their own honors classmates sometimes question their choices to attend our school. Granted, honors program admission is based on a student's academic performance and potential, not on financial need; other financial aid options are available, and a continuing debate in the honors community concerns the benefits and detriments of attaching scholarship money to honors program participation. Honors programs are constituted of students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, and some have been more privileged or sheltered than others. I admit, though, that deep down, I'm a bit envious of my students who don't have to work, of those whose parents pay for housing or allow them to live at home without being responsible for any chores except homework.

On the other hand, for the honors students who do have to work or have serious family responsibilities in addition to attending to their studies, I have tried to be the resource that I found my own honors professors to be. Students often comment that I am one of their most accessible professors, that I lack the pomposity or arrogance with which some professors treat them. One graduate student said that I was the only professor who spoke to the graduate assistants as if they were human beings, and I wondered if it was because I was more sensitive to code-switching between my personal and professional lives or if I was simply never interested in developing the persona of the aloof, derisive academic. I sometimes feel like a Roseanne Conner in a sea of

Frasier Cranes, but then I find myself sitting in my office with an honors student in tears, like the one who curled into a fetal position on my office floor. I rarely receive office-hour visits from the more economically advantaged students unless I disrupt their senses of entitlement when I give them Bs and ruin their 4.0 GPAs, but they tend to turn toward other resources, such as sorority leaders or pre-medical advisors. Then I think about the time I sat under a classroom table during a writing workshop with an honors student who was trying to balance the demands of school and work with her own battle against alcoholism, and I recall the honors professors who extended to me a helping hand, who gave me a modicum of dignity in academic achievement that was denied by my hometown's jocks-and-beauty-queens social strata.

In my ongoing struggle to reconcile my essential blue-collar ethos with my white-collar work environment, I have learned through painful trial and error when to speak my mind and when to keep my mouth shut, when and how to challenge authority, and when to observe the political niceties for which my working-class parents were unable to prepare me. Despite these internal struggles, however, the fact is that I have moved into a higher socioeconomic class, that I have a better work schedule, better benefits, a better house, and a better car than my parents had. I would also venture to say that I also have a better appreciation for these advantages than other academics whose backgrounds permit taking them for granted.

The bottom line for me is that honors education got me out of that steel mill town and on the road toward a good career and a better life.

REFERENCE

Brooks, Garth. "Friends in Low Places." *No Fences*. Capitol Records, 1990.

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