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Ten of Ten, Would Recommend

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Ten of Ten, Would Recommend

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Abstract: As part of the *National Collegiate Honors Council's* (2022) collection of essays about the value of honors to its graduates (1967–2019), the author reflects on the personal and professional impacts of the honors experience.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; authentic learning; University of North Carolina at Charlotte (NC)—Honors College

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I sit on the Honors College Advisory Board at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, my alma mater, where I participated in the Business and University Honors Programs from 2004 through 2008. My first draft of this essay was written before listening to a current honors student describe how University Honors is impacting their life. In that moment, I quickly realized that what they were saying was precisely how I felt as a student, so I threw my first draft out the window (which is typical for me as I'm often throwing produce out our kitchen window to feed the wildlife), and started over.

I was reminded of the three values that have matured within me over time that were undeniably planted and/or watered heavily by the honors program I participated in as an undergraduate: critical thinking, citizenship, and exploration.

Critical thinking is likely the low-hanging fruit of this reflection. It's the default of what many expect an honors program to endow upon its students. Classes are smaller, professors hold a higher standard, and students rise (or sometimes don't) to the challenge. In general, regardless of which program, college should be teaching *all* of its students this skill. But for me, the program I went through truly taught me to think outside of the box I was prescribed

during my previous 18 years on Earth. These courses and assignments showed me that I could think for myself and, equally as important, that I could change my opinion when new information is introduced. I still think back to my realization in honors War and Peace that the two aren't at diverging ends of a pendulum but rather that they overlap . . . severely.

Next up is citizenship. My program required volunteerism and, at the time, it was admittedly a check-the-box behavior. I wasn't against it, but I thought there were enough *other* people around that the community didn't need my help in improving things. My favorite and most-repeated service activity was collecting leftover, untouched food from the dining halls and driving it to the soup kitchens downtown. Part of our responsibility was to unload the food, which is when I would interact with their staff and volunteers. I asked questions and quickly learned, thanks to my newly acquired critical thinking skills, that there *aren't* enough other people helping and that, *yes*, they needed my help. Volunteering soon became the box I was happiest to check. Today, my partner and I are raising our son to understand that there aren't enough people stepping up, and if you see something that needs doing to improve your community, do it yourself. It's easy to assume that your city has it all under control, but they probably don't. They need people to step up. To help. To vote. To do things that *contribute* to society.

And lastly, exploration. My honors program required that we explore our city, which in my case was (and remains) Charlotte, North Carolina. Arts & Society was one of the classes that will forever be in my memory as what unlocked my appreciation of art, photography, and theater. It forced me to see and experience parts of my city that I would almost certainly still be overlooking to this day. Instead, I quickly realized there was a *vast* realm about which I knew close to nothing. I was a business major with a competitive streak that was great for sports and academia, but that didn't allow time for what I thought were "extras." I'm grateful these many years later that I was *required* to experience multiple plays, take pictures of the city for my portfolio, and attend an art exhibit and listen to the artist describe their work. I saw a whole new side of life I otherwise wouldn't have had time for, and I will be forever grateful. Today, when I encounter something new and peculiar, my default reaction isn't judgment, but rather I think, "Perhaps I simply don't know enough about it." I think this response roots back to this experience where I learned to lean in and explore before locking in my opinion.

Today, both in the workplace as an analytics professional and at home as a mother, these three values, critical thinking, citizenship, and exploration,

have remained permanent fixtures in my ethos. Together, they grant room for healthy exploration and maybe even failure, and they ultimately encourage a mindset of curiosity and bravery over echo chambers and fear. If this were a Google review, I'd say, "Ten of Ten, Would Recommend."

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