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A Bridge to Belonging

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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; self-actualization (psychology); University of Iowa (IA)—Honors College

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Growing up as a child of immigrants in a predominantly white community, I felt the tension of an identity crisis early on. I remember being the only Vietnamese person in my class and having to explain why my mom packed me rice for lunch instead of sandwiches. I remember not being able to make friends easily at school, instead seeking out other Vietnamese children down the street or playing with my cousins. Instead of my having doctors or lawyers as parents, my father worked at a meat packing plant and my mother worked at a nail salon. As I grew up, recognizing the differences between me and my peers became less of a choice and more of my reality. I am not ashamed of my background, but it created enough differences that I felt a divide between myself and my classmates. My own identity had become a barrier to belonging.

Because of my upbringing, I had a narrowminded view of what success in college looked like. I felt like I carried this enormous pressure on my shoulders to do well and succeed, which only manifested as self-doubt. I thought I should only focus on science classes and conduct basic science research. After all, I had never met another person with my background who went on to medical school—which was my goal. My first time on University of Iowa's campus, I attended the honors program welcome event. The first student I met was a pre-med sophomore named Anya. She told me about all the honors classes she was

taking, which ranged from the typical biology and organic chemistry to something I wasn't expecting, a class on the Beatles and one on women's studies. It was the first time I realized that my perception of education may have been limited as I never considered the other ways learning can present itself.

I was so used to honors classes being presented as advanced, exclusive courses that were faster and more challenging than traditional courses. However, I couldn't have been more wrong. My honors classes became portals that transported me to other areas of learning and education I had never thought to discover before. In my Honors Philosophy class, I was encouraged to volunteer at my local children's hospital and record weekly videos of myself discussing how I was processing the patient stories I was hearing and what I was learning about myself on my own path to medical school. In my Music, Madness, Disease, and Death seminar, I learned not only about the chemical structure of popular rock and roll drugs, but also about how rock and roll music reflected the deep turmoil that surrounded the social and cultural changes that preceded the 1960s.

These classes also grouped me with other students I wouldn't have had a chance to learn with. My classmates studied political science, chemical engineering, and creative writing. These classes weren't what I expected, but they are the ones that helped me learn the most about myself. It was eye-opening to be able to be in a room of like-minded, yet totally diverse individuals, many of whom I would have never met outside of my honors classes. To me, the beauty of honors lies in its mission: to cultivate a community of like-minded individuals with a curiosity and passion for learning. By focusing on our shared goals, I learned to see and accept the different facets of my identity as strengths instead of barriers to inclusion. What one student had trouble conceptualizing, another student could explain with ease. That's the beauty of diversity: there is never a shortage of perspective. As I progressed through college, the classes I took and the people I met diversified not only how I saw my education, but also how I saw myself.

Three years after graduation, I am a third-year medical student and the student body president of my medical school. My undergraduate experience in the honors program helped me not only meet my academic goals but was also formative in making me the woman I had always wanted to become. If I could tell my younger self something, it would be this: Open yourself up to the possibility that your differences deserve to be celebrated and seek out the opportunities to learn about yourself where you might least expect it.

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