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The Honors Connection: Openness and Empathy

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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; liberal learning; Oklahoma City University (OK)—Honors Program

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I entered college as a performing arts major and graduated with a degree in economics, a rather seismic shift at face value. College is a time of great exploration and soul-searching, and while such freedom is exhilarating, it is often very stressful to sort through constantly evolving goals. Despite transitioning through three different majors, I was able to graduate in four years as planned, largely thanks to Honors.

The Honors program was my first introduction to college, and in my first few hours at school I met my fellow Honors peers, a small group of students from all over the country studying a multitude of topics from business and music to nursing and the humanities. After pursuing dance with a one-track mind for the first 18 years of my life, my eyes were quickly opened to the other avenues that were available to me. Curiosity was the first value that Honors instilled in me, and eventually led me to a career I never would have considered otherwise.

The Honors courses I was required to take opened my eyes to topics I had never been exposed to before: world religions, medicine & literature, and fascism & film to name a few. I was not particularly enthused about taking

some of these classes at first, but I left with transformative perspectives on the power of empathy, the importance of openness, and the value of challenging my own viewpoints. I learned that changing my mind when presented with new information is not a sign of weakness, but one of humility and strength. Given the fragile state of the world today, these truths have served me now more than ever.

Honors, at its very core, is about the commonalities of the human experience. No matter where we come from or what we have experienced in our separate lives, we are all deeply connected in our humanness. What makes us human is our ability to feel. I have learned in my adult life that the presence of one feeling does not mean the absence of another—it is possible to feel confident yet scared, deeply sad yet joyful at the same time. Honors taught me how to recognize my emotions and think critically about why certain things cause us to feel the way we feel. Intuition is powerful, and I learned to trust mine. That was why, when I took my first economics class and felt immediately drawn to the subject, I allowed my curiosity and intuition to take control and changed my major.

Economics seems like a far cry from the dance industry, but both dance and economics are rooted in human behavior and connection. Dance is a physical expression of the human condition, and economics is the study of markets, which are at their very root driven by the feelings and decisions made by the people within them. This sort of interconnection exists in every aspect of our world and is truly fascinating to think about. The point of honors is to learn to seek out this connectedness and use it as a tool to explore and engage with the world around us.

I now work at the largest privately held bank in the country as a financial analyst, valuing portfolios of mortgage-related assets, driving process improvement initiatives, and contributing to investment decisions that drive roughly half of the bank's \$30 billion asset base. If anyone would have told 18-year-old me that I would have a career in finance and that my success in that field would be largely owed to a combination of openness, humility, and creativity, I would have scoffed. Honors provided me with the tools to hone these values in my personal life, and they have since crossed over into my professional life in a way I never thought was possible.

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