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# Forging an Honors Bond

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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; Ubuntu (philosophy); Utah State University (UT)—Honors Program

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Standing in line at the local fire station, my wife and I were waiting for our COVID-19 inoculations. The firefighters had been commissioned to administer the vaccines. Health department workers were examining paperwork, and volunteers were guiding patrons through the line. Looking around while trying to manage our children, I noticed a volunteer with a familiar-looking face, half-concealed by a mask. I had not seen the instructor of my first honors course in well over a decade, so, to confirm, I greeted her and asked, “What’s your name?”

She was indeed my former honors professor, and what followed was a short yet buoyant exchange in which I eagerly shared some updates, such as the major I had settled on in college, my current job, and my family status. I was excited to see her. That first honors course included honors students from a variety of disciplines, and as an engineering major, I was not expecting to build a strong connection with them or with the instructor, a linguistics professor. Yet her concern for each student coupled with her willingness to listen fostered camaraderie and conversation, both in the classroom and personally, and my self-imposed barriers quickly collapsed.

In my first and subsequent semesters, I participated in honors courses in disciplines ranging from English to engineering and covering everything from persuasion to partial derivatives. These courses, capstone projects, research, service, leadership, and other opportunities available to honors students provide invaluable preparation for the future. But as I reflect on my honors experience, I realize those were only the most obvious benefits. The real impact of the honors program is that it connects people with one another in meaningful ways. Honors introduced me to fellow students who became lifelong friends, fostered relationships with instructors who set high expectations for me and my peers, and forged bonds between high-caliber individuals eager to make the world a better place.

These are connections you remember. For example, one day in honors calculus, I began wondering about the mathematical relationship between the path of a bicycle's front and rear wheels. After class, I approached the instructor, who thought about my question and offered some ideas about it. This instructor eventually left our institution for a position at another university, and I lost contact with him. However, after some time, he emailed me: "I want to let you know that I still think about your question on the bicycle wheel paths," and he proceeded to list some relevant resources about the problem. Maybe it was an interesting problem to him, but what impresses me is that this honors faculty member remembered me as he sought to continue learning himself.

In the past several years, I have made an effort to participate in an alumni mentoring program through the Utah State University Honors Program. As I have mentored these honors students, I have been impressed by their eagerness not only to excel in their fields but to connect with me as a person. One connection even led to a mentee becoming a stellar member of my team at work. I look forward to seeing where other connections with these outstanding students may lead.

While honors programs are certainly not the only organizations that *can* foster such personal and professional connections, they are uniquely placed to facilitate interpersonal bonds because of their focus on the future and their high hopes and expectations for the individuals they serve. In my experience, both honors faculty and students seek not just learning but its transcendent meaning to humankind, fulfilling Herbert Spencer's often quoted idea that "the great aim of education is not knowledge but action."

For me, the value of honors education can be summed up in one word: ubuntu. The late Reverend Desmond Tutu explains, "Ubuntu . . . speaks about

our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality—Ubuntu—you are known for your generosity. . . . When you do well, it spreads out" (Rich).

Bonds forged in honors may change the world—or they may just change an individual or a community. Maybe an honors student will reflect the light received during their own honors experience as they mentor the next generation. Perhaps a math instructor intrigued about bicycle wheels will continue his role as an educator well past the end of a semester. Or maybe, just maybe, a bond will lead to a bright moment between an engineer and a linguistics professor as she generously volunteers during a pandemic.

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