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Citadels of Interdisciplinarity

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Emory & Henry College, 2010–2014

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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; interdisciplinary approach to knowledge; Emory & Henry College (VA)—Honors Program

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As the demands of academic research galvanize disciplinary silos and market forces pressure students into increasingly specialized courses of study, honors education stands as one of the few remaining citadels of interdisciplinarity on America's college campuses. My experience as an undergraduate honors student was characterized by a community of deep intellectual richness committed to student-driven, collaborative, integrative and critical inquiry. Honors constellates diversity in tradition and method, from chemists to historians, future doctors to future lawyers, engineers that will go on to tend inventively to society's infrastructure and social scientists that will unsettle the familiar by deconstructing its social ones. The value of honors education is not limited to discrete professional, personal, or civic instantiations. Indeed, the value of honors education manifests in each, as the multi- and inter-disciplinary mode of inquiry it fosters informs how one discerns the world around them, orients their place within it, and conducts in concert their engagement in collective life.

One of the primary values of interdisciplinarity is the capacity to consider a problem from multiple perspectives, to adjust its valance, to weigh

competing types of evidence, and to locate, complicate, and unsettle the origin of a claim's persuasive force. Honors facilitates interdisciplinary, critical inquiry through coursework and community. It encourages a student-led learning experience that refuses to hedge too closely to one way of thinking. By allowing, for example, students to design parts of a course syllabus, honors coursework naturally takes on a trajectory that weaves students' interests. As a result, the typical honors course is one that builds out students' analytical toolkits by approaching a single topic from a variety of perspectives, ways of formulating research questions, standards of evidence, and commitments to worldly betterment. In a historical moment in which the dilemmas of modern society are characterized by their totalizing effects, the interdisciplinary view of and ability to engage with the world that honors instills has never been in higher demand.

Honors also accomplishes that instillation by way of fostering a community of individuals from diverse social, political, economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Such community was central to my experience as an honors student. From speaker series to seminars, formal dinners to informal bonfires, I enjoyed the fellowship and intellectual engagement of my peers within the honors community. In one such instance, I recall exchanging ideas with my cohort about our respective senior honors thesis projects in the autumn of 2013. I was writing about Second Amendment jurisprudence and rights to self-defense. I remember the sociology majors pushing me to consider the role of gender in claims to justified violence. I remember the history major who pointed me to several instructive texts. I remember the biology major pressing me to clarify the logical connection between my thesis and my evidence. And I remember the mathematics major, in whom I remain unconvinced there is a single humanist sympathy, imploring me to explain why the project mattered at all. It was a crucible of various perspectives all intersecting my project from different angles.

A project that was, in retrospect, initially a not-so-clever linkage of a few syllogisms matured to a critical inquiry of the socio-legal underpinnings of constitutional jurisprudence because of precisely those and subsequent similar interactions. I was fortunate to present and receive invaluable feedback on the project at the National Collegiate Honors Council annual conference, and I used the insights offered by fellow members of the honors community to later publish the work in the *Columbia Undergraduate Law Review*, serve as a panelist on CNN for firearms-related self-defense, and develop a prospectus for graduate school.

Today, I am a PhD Candidate in Jurisprudence & Social Policy at UC Berkeley and a Supervising Analyst with the Judicial Council of California, where I oversee the policy analysis and program implementation for court fines and fees reform—which is just a fanciful way of saying that I wake up every day and try my best to cultivate more equitable and humane criminal justice services. I owe my professional role now to my experience as an honors student then. As a public servant, I must remain attentive to the many interests that enjoin legal institutions, the competing policy goals that reverberate across them, and the trade-offs one aim may have for another. I work alongside data scientists and web developers, lawyers and policy analysts, legal aid groups and non-profits, judicial officers and bureaucrats of all stripes. My daily interactions are not unlike those with my honors cohort: a multiplicity of perspectives all intersecting from different angles the task of ensuring access to justice. As it turns out, the public interest does not hew to a single perspective—it is diverse in tradition and in method; if I am to serve it well at all, I will owe it to the collaborative and interdisciplinary inquiry that honors taught me to value.

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