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# Southern Appalachian

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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; first-generation college students; Emory & Henry College (VA)—Honors Program

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I am a Southern Appalachian, first-generation college student from a small town—a place where folks are sometimes considered backwards, ignorant, and or even a bit “simple minded.”

Coming to Emory & Henry College, I was certainly among the lesser-prepared students in my honors cohort. I did not attend a Governor’s School, I did not have lessons with local college professors, and I did not meet the test-score requirements for the program. And while I was “in,” there was an unspoken doubt. Immediately, my education was questioned in its rigor and breadth. I know this doubt reflected the high academic standards of the program, but it also carried unspoken assumptions about the place I came from. I would spend the next four years working to dismantle this doubt, proving myself capable and succeeding where I felt I was expected to fail. Ultimately, the Honors Program facilitated this success.

Being an Honors Scholar carries with it a certain amount of prestige among college professors, and this designation removed the barrier-of-entry for me in many respects. I was able to take advanced courses earlier in my undergraduate career, which allowed for independent studies and research projects. I was able to propose, develop, and present an Honors Thesis on

a topic that would eventually persuade me to get a PhD in Acoustics. I was able to “honors contract” courses to cover material not taught at my college to better prepare for graduate school. I was even able to study abroad at the University of Cambridge.

I was an Honors Scholar and a Southern Appalachian, not only succeeding but thriving.

I hold these opportunities and experiences close to my heart, as they encompass both academic and personal growth. Gone was the imposter syndrome, the feeling of being less, compared to my cohort. In its place was the understanding that each student brings with them a skill set and knowledge base that, when put together, creates an environment for success and greater achievement than would have been possible alone. Being from my place, being of my people and they of theirs, we were able to form a cohort of Honors Scholars that grew in understanding through people from all places.

This alone is my greatest and most cherished takeaway from my time as an Honors Scholar. I was afforded the space to ask my questions, to pursue my goals with a foundation of people pushing me to succeed. It helped show me my value as a student, my value as a person, my value as a Southern Appalachian, first-generation college student from a small town—a place where folks are resilient, humble, and of incredible mind.