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Finding Community, Support, and the Importance of Detours

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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; Texas A&M University (TX)—Honors Program

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In the early weeks of my undergraduate experience, I sat down with the Director of the Honors Program and told him I wanted to go to Oxford for graduate school, or an Ivy at the very least; then asked what I'd need on my résumé to get there. I was an ambitious but naïve 18-year-old. Fortunately, I found my way to the Honors Program at Texas A&M University, where I was supported, mentored, and shaped into a more well-rounded, open-minded individual.

My advisor did take me seriously during that first meeting, exemplifying the first value I gained at Honors: the value of listening to people and responding thoughtfully. He laid out a comprehensive list of accomplishments that a competitive résumé would have. But he also asked how I was acclimating to the Honors Living Community and encouraged me to explore all the extracurricular opportunities the Honors Program had available. After living in the community for a year, I applied to be a live-in peer mentor and Teaching Assistant for incoming freshmen. I discovered the importance of contributing to my community and a joy in mentoring. My relationships with

my students and the other mentors were enriching and lasting. When my students knocked on my door at all hours needing help with classes, an advocate, or a shoulder to cry on, I learned more about empathy and crisis management at 20 years old than many people learn in a lifetime. I found incredible support in the other mentors; we leaned on each other emotionally, academically, and socially. I learned the necessity and beauty of community building. An activity that was initially just a great addition to my résumé became an integral part of my life and a support system to this day.

As a member of a selective scholarship program within the wider Honors scheme, I was mandated to take a class every semester that had no relation to my major, Bioenvironmental Science. In classes like the Psychology of Superheroes and The Meaning of Life, I learned with and debated other students from different fields and points of view. Honors showed me the importance of an interdisciplinary approach and the value of engaging intellectually with people from varied backgrounds. Almost nothing I did and learned through this program had an immediate and obvious utility. The purpose was curiosity. This interdisciplinary outlook later served me in my career as an environmental consultant, where I would become fluent in new business markets with every new client.

With graduation looming, I decided I no longer wanted to apply to graduate school, at least not yet. My honors advisors and professors fully supported my decision to take some time off from school and work. In my experience, motivated, high-achieving people often feel significant pressure to accomplish. But the values I gained through the Honors Program allowed me to prioritize other aspects of my life when necessary: my mental health, my relationships, and testing out my professional goals.

After working for a few years, I was ready to approach graduate school. My advisor from the Texas A&M Honors Program was my first call. He talked me through the different programs I was considering, still making time for a student so many years later. He wrote my letters of recommendation and connected me to an A&M alumnus and Rhodes Scholar to help me on my application. I contacted the research professor I initially met through an Honors seminar before working in his lab for years as an undergraduate. He wrote a letter of recommendation and edited my technical essays. I learned the value of maintaining professional relationships and the impact a few hours of someone's time can have.

Currently, I am studying Biodiversity, Conservation, and Management at the University of Oxford. I employ the values I gained in the Honors Program

every day. I am an engaged, contributing member of my community, serving on the graduate student committee as the Sustainability Officer. I sought out an interdisciplinary graduate program, with a cohort of lawyers, biologists, and mathematicians. I strive to be a supportive peer, particularly with new hires at my job and peers at Oxford. Wherever my path leads, I know my academic, professional, and personal life will always be better for the formation I received in the Texas A&M University Honors Program.

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