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There and Back Again

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

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I am fortunate to have experienced the Texas A&M University Honors Program in two unique capacities: first as an undergraduate (2001–2005) and now as a faculty member (2017–present). Both experiences have been tremendously enriching in different ways. As an undergraduate, my experience in the Texas A&M Honors Programs nurtured my growth as a scholar, encouraged independent thought, and allowed me to gain experience in scientific research, which started me on my path to becoming a scientist. As a faculty member, I now have the amazing opportunity to pay it forward by mentoring my own high-achieving undergrads, both in the classroom and the laboratory.

I was intimately involved with the University Honors Program all throughout college. As a freshman biochemistry major, one of the very first classes I attended was the Honors Life Sciences Learning Community. This was a small group of students who met weekly to talk about current topics in biochemistry, learn about cutting-edge research in the department, read scientific papers, and discuss issues relevant to college students such as building good study habits. This was my first toe dipped into honors, and I never looked back.

Over the next four years, I took a variety of honors coursework within my major (biochemistry, molecular genetics, microbiology) as well as interesting electives outside my major (English: *Art or Trash?*; sociology: *The Marriage Institution*). These courses allowed me and my peers a whole new level of engagement with the subject matter. They had a lot in common: small class sizes, in-depth discussions based on contemporary and classic literature, and writing intensive assignments. The professors made special efforts to ignite class discussions that left us with a deeper understanding of the material than we would have gained in a non-honors course. These small, engaging classes also allowed us to forge lifelong friendships. Some of my closest friends from the Honors program went on to do their PhD work at top institutions and have now settled all over the world, from California to Washington, D.C.; from the United Kingdom to Abu Dhabi. These classmates now serve in leadership positions in academia, medicine, and government.

I became involved in laboratory research as a freshman and quickly fell in love with it. After gaining enough experience to become entrusted with my own independent project, I joined the University Undergraduate Research Fellows program. This program allowed me to delve into the process of writing my own research thesis—a precursor to the scientific manuscripts and PhD dissertation that would come later. Beyond the writing itself, the program allowed me to attend several workshops on scientific writing and presentation skills as well as a seminar series in which each Research Scholar presented their research project in an oral presentation. I vividly remember my voice shaking as I nervously presented my findings in what was my first oral scientific presentation ever. I look back very fondly on that time as it was my introduction into the world of scientific research. I never looked back, and I shifted my career plan from medical school to graduate school due in large part to my experience with honors.

Fast forward 12 years through a PhD and postdoctoral fellowship. In 2017, I landed my dream job as a tenure-track Assistant Professor in the Texas A&M Department of Biology—my academic home. In the past 5 years, I have mentored a total of 27 undergraduates in my lab, over half of whom have been involved with honors and undergraduate research in some capacity. This includes honors research credits, honors writing intensives, 5 Undergraduate Research Scholars theses (and counting), participation in the Undergraduate Research Ambassadors program, and competition in university-level and national awards. My students are serving in leadership positions and engaging in peer mentoring through the honors program. They are learning how to

write research theses just as I did, and they are winning awards for their oral and poster presentations. I am privileged to watch these students come in as freshmen and become shaped through their involvement in the diversity of Honors activities over the next four years before they spread their wings and leave for medical, graduate, or professional school.

Participating in Honors as a student, and now as a faculty member, has shown me how much the opportunities afforded by the program fuel personal and professional growth, giving students opportunities that would not have been possible otherwise. Without the life-changing experiences of the honors program, I would certainly not be where I am today.

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