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From Jersey Shore to AP Lit Teacher

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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; English teachers; Penn State University (PA)—Schreyer Honors College

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My undergraduate experience was mundane, average, and boring. I excelled academically, a little too easily. I could skip the readings and ace my classes half asleep. It was a normal experience for me to write entire papers an hour before the due date and receive As. In one instance a professor publicly recognized me as having written the best paper in the entire class. I beamed with a shocked kind of pride, laughing on the inside because I knew at that moment that something seriously needed to change.

I sought out the honors program because I wanted an increased academic challenge for personal fulfillment and to differentiate my résumé. I never dreamed I would find an experience so transformational and inspirational, shaping my interests and still affecting my choices years later.

After acceptance into the program, I designed honors options to attach to my major classes, which customized my coursework to my academic interests and career goals. My honors options included an array of amazing opportunities: remediating projects for web publication, assisting with research for a professor's textbook, promoting his textbook through the planning of

campus-wide events, and creating press materials for print and web media, just to name a few.

In addition to the honors options, I took honors courses outside of my major. I anticipated the higher academic expectations and as a result was contributing a much bigger effort. I was still excelling, only now I was feeling challenged, engaging with the material, and learning more than ever.

My horizons were expanding not only academically but personally as well. I am thankful for the exposure to literature, art museums, and international trips I would not have gained otherwise. I was not a stereotypical or even traditional honors student. I did not seek out the program until my junior year of college. I had never taken AP or honors courses in high school, and I did not aspire to get an advanced degree. I was unfamiliar with literature, art, language, and other topics my honors peers could talk about all day. Before honors, my idea of culture was reading *Cosmo*, watching *Jersey Shore*, and obsessing over the latest diet trends. I still cringe when I think about how I mispronounced “Yeats” in front of a group of my honors peers.

One honors literature seminar contributed immensely to my cultural expansion. Before this course I was uninterested in and even skeptical of literature, viewing it as useless to me as an aspiring entertainment journalist. Afterward, my perspective had been entirely changed, and I realized that the academic study of literature is worthwhile. Furthermore, it can be a catalyst for learning about any and every major or career. I was amazed how the works of Oscar Wilde, William Goldman, George Orwell, and even Shakespeare helped me learn about journalism in the present day (I later co-wrote about my experience in an article entitled “Why Study Literature?” published in *Rendezvous Journal of Arts & Letters: The State of the Humanities*).

My interest in literature was sparked so much I considered changing my career path to teach the subject. Seven years later: Life happened. I never accomplished any of my career goals, and I hit a rough patch in my personal life. I received an unexpected email about writing opportunities from Sandy, the honors coordinator and professor of that course. Her email brought back amazing memories from the honors program and caused me to reflect on my career as I updated her on the past seven years.

She reminded me of what I had said after taking her course: I want to be an English teacher. This timely reminder motivated me to seek a more fulfilling career, chase my dreams, and begin graduate study in English education. None of this would have been possible without my acceptance into the honors program: The higher level of academic engagement, customized approach

to learning, and incredible opportunities I found changed my life forever. Honors was the catalyst for my growth personally, academically, and professionally, during the program and many years later.

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