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Non Magis Sed Melior, “Not More, but Better”

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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; experiential learning; Columbia College (SC)—Dr. John Zubizarreta Honors Program

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The year was 1989. I had moved from a rural community in Michigan to South Carolina to attend Columbia College, a private, liberal-arts women's college. The culture shock and adjustment were equal parts exhilarating and unnerving. I was welcomed by the warm, Southern charm of campus and was nurtured, personally and academically, by the close-knit community of the honors program.

I had a rich college experience in general, but being an honors student changed the entire trajectory of my career and shaped me personally, instilling confidence, motivation, and purpose. The indelible mark stemmed from the program's motto: *Non Magis Sed Melior*, “Not More, but Better.” The program was intentionally grounded not in the quantity of coursework but in the quality, delivering a deep academic experience that challenged students to reach their highest potential as scholars and leaders.

I enjoyed many honors courses distinguished by intimate learning environments and professors with unparalleled enthusiasm for teaching excellence.

Oftentimes, classes were as small as five students, held not only in traditional classrooms but also outside on the lawn, in common areas on couches, or even at McDonald's. I was inspired by an English professor's exuberance that rivaled Robin Williams's impassioned character, John Keating, in *Dead Poets Society*. He, too, encouraged each student to "make her life extraordinary." The value of an honors education is embodied by developing lifelong skills and forging personal bonds with students and professors alike. These features are arguably the threads of the tapestry of honors programs across the country and the hallmarks of distinction that draw students to honors.

Participating in honors conferences opened my eyes to a larger world and whetted my appetite to want more, to dream bigger. While at my first conference, we shuttled around the streets of Fells Point—a historic, waterfront neighborhood in Baltimore—to experience the ethnic culture and diversity. We dined in an authentic tapas restaurant where our honors director instructed the server to speak to us only in Spanish. To this day, tapas remain one of my favorite fares. During that trip, I would have neither predicted that a few years later I would return to those streets as a graduate student at George Washington University nor imagined that my profession would take me to conferences around the world. Not more, but better.

Non Magis Sed Melior especially came to life for me in honors biology. I had dreamed of becoming a lawyer since the age of ten. I charted my academic path based on recommendations for getting into law school. However, to meet my science requirements for graduation, I enrolled in honors biology. During captivating lectures on the fundamentals of genetics, the professor went beyond the textbook to bring in recent publications in the field. Instead of moving on as the syllabus indicated, she embraced our interest and dug deeper with us, challenging us to think of the emerging possibilities of how these findings may impact science and healthcare. My intellectual curiosity was piqued. Then, she arranged a fieldtrip to a rare, at that time, degree-granting genetic counseling program to attend a private lecture and tour the laboratories.

The time was contemporary to the discovery that some forms of early-onset familial breast cancer are heritable, which ultimately led to the cloning and sequencing of the BRCA1 gene. Women who were taking drastic preventive measures with prophylactic double mastectomies or who were living under a cloud of dread awaiting their fate became empowered to make informed decisions about their health. Concurrently, the gene for Huntington's disease—a rare, inherited neurological condition—was discovered. A

classmate would be confronted with whether she wanted to be tested. For me, the power of genetics was unleashed. One professor, within the freedom of an honors course, urged us to explore and be challenged. Not more, but better.

I changed my major to biology and focused my honors project on a genetic survey of the student population. I was later awarded my PhD in genetics. Fortuitously, I have been able to meld my pre-law interests with my passion for science throughout my career. From my postdoctoral experience at a life sciences startup to a biotechnology company to a research-intensive, top academic medical center, I have been able to succeed at the intersection of science and business, developing a rewarding career leading research operations, administration, and strategy. In my current position, my impact is greater by enabling the research of many scientists than if I had stayed in the laboratory. Not more, but better.

Reflecting on my journey in 2022 makes my achievements seem ordinary, given where we stand in education and science today. But as I rewind thirty years to put my growth into perspective, I realize that my experience in an honors program grounded in interdisciplinary, collaborative, and experiential learning; empowerment; and leadership was quite extraordinary—indeed, not more, but better.

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