

Expensive Mistakes: How Hitting Career Rock Bottom Showed Me What I Really Learned in Honors

PEPPER HAYES

Westminster College, 2001–2005

Director of Development Operations & Communications at BUILD.org

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; psychological resilience; Westminster College (UT)—Honors College

Citation: *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 2022, 23(1): 51–53

Twenty years ago, I was an honors student with a very well-rounded course schedule and a résumé full of interesting extracurricular activities and leadership experiences. Unfortunately, for me, “well-rounded” translated to “directionless,” and I had no idea what to do after graduation. That’s when I made my first mistake: I crowdsourced the decision.

I asked nearly everyone I knew for their opinion and the feedback was unanimous: go to law school. I can see why. If you had asked me at the time, “what is the benefit of an honors education?” I would have told you that the honors program trained me to think analytically, made me a stronger writer, and increased my intellectual capacity. In short: it was the perfect proving ground for a future lawyer. So, why not?

It turns out that law wasn’t for me. I won’t go into the long list of reasons why, but I can tell you that I realized this incompatibility on my very first day of law school. Because I wasn’t a quitter, I stubbornly saw it through to the

end. Then I took the bar exam. Then I practiced law for five years, bouncing around from job to job, trying to find something that felt right . . . digging myself into a deeper hole with every next step. That was my second mistake: not being able to recognize a sunk cost and move on.

So, after almost ten years of this downward spiral, I finally summoned the courage to climb out of the pit of despair that was my legal career. On that upward climb, I discovered the true value of my honors education.

My path up started with self-reflection. I realized that I didn't thrive in honors because I was smart. I thrived because honors provided a place where I could bring my authentic self to the table every day and collaborate with an energetic and diverse group of students who were just as curious and creative as I was. So, if you ask me now about the value of my honors education, I will tell you that it taught me to seek out or create the kind of environments I just described.

Armed with that realization, I started a new career search beginning with the "where" not the "what." I found an organization that values diversity and authenticity, and I plugged myself in where they had a need; this required mastering an entirely new skill set in finance and operations, which was no problem thanks to my "well-rounded" background. I absolutely love my job and I rely on the skills I learned in honors every day.

Westminster's Honors College recently solicited feedback from alums about the value of honors. (Many were very happily practicing law, I should add). I read through all forty reflections and saw common threads on how honors grads use their skills in the workplace.

One of the most prominent themes was a sense that we can confidently navigate diverse or cross-disciplinary spaces. Alums used their experience in interdisciplinary honors courses to seek out different perspectives, gather information across various sources, and come up with "out of the box" solutions.

The respondents also cited the diversity of the honors community and how the conversational nature of the classes gave them practice asking questions and listening to opposing viewpoints. They also learned to interrogate their own assumptions and biases, which is critical for collaboration and consensus building.

I collaborate with almost every department at my company and I can confirm that these skills were some of my most valuable takeaways from honors.

Nearly every alum in the survey credited honors for improving their communication skills in some way. Obviously, praise for the writing skills

we mastered topped the list, followed by gratitude for learning how to speak succinctly and precisely. Alums also shared a deep appreciation for the way that honors helped us find our voices and taught us how to have meaningful conversations.

A good number of the responses credited honors with instilling in them a true joy for learning and self-reflection, or, as one alum put it: “self-honesty.” They understand their values and, like me, are living purpose-driven lives.

I don’t regret the path I took to get here, although given the price of law school tuition, it was an expensive mistake. What I do regret is that, for too long, I thought being smart, analytical, and having the ability to read philosophy tomes for ten hours straight were the most valuable skills in my toolbox. My honors education prepared me for so much more than that and I’m grateful that I’m finally able to put it to use.

The author may be contacted at
phayes@build.org.