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Why Honors Matters

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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; communicative competence; University of Delaware (DE)—Honors College

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In 2022, I turned half-a-century old. I have a loving family, good friends, and a really interesting career at a large law firm. By any measure, I am a lucky man.

So how, over these fifty years, did I get here? Supportive parents, who were also public-school educators, are unquestionably the foundation. A good law school education? No doubt, that also helped. But time and again, when I think about the inflection point for my personal and professional path, it was my time at the University of Delaware. To be more precise, it was the university's Honors Program.

When I started at the university, all freshmen Honors students were tucked into the least-new dorm at the least-close edge of campus, literally on the other side of the train tracks. I presume we were placed there because the administration assumed we wouldn't complain, and we'd be studying a lot, anyway. These were not entirely inaccurate assumptions. We did not complain, and we did study hard, but I have some news. Honors students are also fun. They are interesting. They are engaged and engaging. Particularly at a larger university, immediately being connected with a community of intelligent, thoughtful, and *fun* people is an amazing thing.

By facilitating this community, an Honors program encourages learning in a most important and unique way. You can be authentic to who you are—it's okay to study really hard, and if that is all you want to do, knock yourself out. Nobody will judge. If you want to work hard, but play hard too once in a while, that also works. "Be true to thyself," and all that. It is incredibly important—particularly at the stage in life when the rational part of your brain is still developing—to know that there is a community of like-minded folks who will support you. And this support will carry throughout your lifetime—it becomes part of you.

An honors program also encourages boldness and creativity. There is no hiding in the back of a 15-person class. It is time to step up, maybe make a mistake or two, but keep going. That's what you're here for, right? I emerged from the Honors Program a much more confident, poised, and *prepared* person. I cannot emphasize the preparation piece enough. If you want to shine among a carefully curated group of top students, in small classes, with brilliant faculty, you cannot fake it. Know your stuff and be prepared to explain it. This mentality certainly has served me well in the courtroom, in my personal life, and within organizational leadership.

Finally, I must mention writing and communication. I am writing right now. We all write and communicate with people literally every day, for a good part of the day. Even if the technologies have changed since 1993, it is as important as ever to be a clear writer and a persuasive communicator. Survey courses have their value, no doubt. But whether an English major, a chemical engineering major, or some uniquely brilliant hybrid of both (not this guy), you need to say what you mean, explain why you are saying it, and have this practice become muscle memory. An honors program allows for individualized attention to, and focus on, the writing and communication process. When I now sit on the hiring side of the table, and I see that someone is an Honors graduate, I know that they will be a strong communicator. And I know that goes a long, long way towards success.

So, that's all I have for now. Thanks for the opportunity to share the importance of Honors in my life. It mattered. It matters.

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