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Skill and Community Development through an Honors Education

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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; self-efficacy; William Paterson University (NJ)—Honors College

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My enrollment at William Paterson University was mainly informed by financial considerations; however, the value of the honors education I received in terms of skill development and educational outcomes has proven to be just as beneficial. Within the academic setting, I learned how to successfully collaborate with peers in the first-year honors cluster of general education courses, to cultivate a desire and curiosity to learn both inside and outside of my major discipline (political science), to take an interdisciplinary approach to research through honors sections of core curriculum courses, and to develop and stick to a routine through writing an undergraduate honors thesis. These are all important skills, but I also acquired social skills that have assisted not only in interactions with colleagues and peers inside academia but also in developing meaningful relationships with my communities and generating a support system that continues to sustain my life and future endeavors.

Of the academic skills I cultivated and developed through my honors education, the one most directly important to my success as a graduate

student is self-discipline and the ability to work independently. The Social Science Honors Track, which consisted of theory, methodology, and application courses in social science research, as well as independent studies with my honors thesis advisor, exposed me to the research process for the first time in a way that is consistent with the expectations of my graduate studies. I learned how to read and organize literature, distinguish between critical methodologies, choose research methods best suited to my research question and theory, and present my research in front of an academic audience. Importantly, each class and meeting developed my interaction skills with professors who taught courses and with my honors thesis advisor. The cultivation of the advisor/advisee relationship enabled me to meaningfully ask questions, learn from the experiences of my advisor, and accept critique with humility; these are all skills and values that I have taken with me in the graduate setting.

Through the Honors College, I also created and participated in communities inside and outside of the classroom that have acted as a support system. My fellow honors students understood and empathized with my struggles in courses and juggling work, school, and personal responsibilities. This connection over shared experiences turned into a community where we celebrated our victories together and comforted each other in times of struggle. The professors who taught honors courses also acted as a crucial structure of support. They took interest both in my research interests and ideas (which, despite changing frequently, my professors always took seriously and provided meaningful feedback) and in my life. My family and friends encouraged me every step of the way from taking my first honors courses to presenting my honors thesis, and the Honors College facilitated this connection through the Honors Award Ceremony for students who presented their thesis and other events where family members were encouraged to attend and cheer on the students.

Reflecting on my experiences in the Honors College at William Paterson University, there are two takeaways that stand out the most in my mind. First, much of the coursework, especially those courses geared toward the development of the honors thesis, prepared me for my graduate studies. The interactions I had with professors during this time were especially crucial for my personal and professional development. The desire to learn and to conduct research that I cultivated during my time as an honors student has remained a driving force in my life. Second, the support system that I created and that was facilitated through the Honors College has sustained my motivation to learn and create new supportive relationships in my graduate studies. Support and encouragement are just as vital to a successful and fulfilling education as

skilled professors and faculty. The skills and communities that the Honors College assisted in developing have helped me to continually aspire to be the best scholar, friend, sister, daughter, and colleague that I can.

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