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# Rooted in Relations: Honors and a Relation-Based Approach to Learning

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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; social emotional learning; Appalachian State University (NC)—Honors College

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After graduating with my bachelors, I took a 6-month temporary job in Nepal working with a non-profit doing development research. While there I worked with a cohort of international and Nepali interns, and my fellow international expatriates continuously remarked on the ways life in Nepal bleeds into the streets. They pointed out that in much of the Western world, life is confined to our living rooms or patios, guarded by privacy fences. In Nepal, life has a less sterile rhythm. Neighbors always initiated greetings, offering Chia to be idly sipped over conversation. Life was inextricably intertwined, an increasing anomaly in the West as we retreat to the privacy of our single-family homes and, more recently, to the squares of our Zoom screens.

When my fellow international co-workers pointed this out, I was really taken aback by how I had never noticed this stark difference. Once they mentioned it, the difference was clear and prolific, but I couldn't shake why I hadn't noticed it. Then I realized that my most recent experiences in the U.S. hadn't been confined to backyard BBQs or insular experiences but were rooted in community. My undergraduate experiences and time at my school's honors

college were anything but isolated. Learning was fostered through conversation. Socratic style seminars encouraged dialogue. Friendships were made in the classroom and sustained once the semester had ended. We were encouraged to invest in our relationships with not only friends but also faculty. These relationships superseded academic needs by providing emotional support. In reflection, my time at Appalachian State University and as an honors college student for all four years was a time of interconnection, of relationships, and subsequent growth.

I think COVID has accelerated a trend that was already on the precipice, a world that retreats behind screens and is increasingly disconnected. As colleges have moved online, I worry about the reticence to return to classrooms as many have become accustomed to working from home. However, I think programs like the honors college will push against this trend through encouraging a relations-based approach to learning. My life has shown me time and time again that relationships are more than necessary but the premise of our humanity, our emotional landscape, and I am forever grateful for my honors experience in laying the foundations of this belief.

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