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More than an Academic Challenge— A Sense of Belonging

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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; nontraditional college students; Johnson County Community College (KS)—Honors Program

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Johnson County Community College (JCCC) has a mission to inspire learning to transform lives and strengthen communities. And that is exactly what it did for me. My life was transformed not only by attending JCCC but by being part of the Honors Program.

I moved to Kansas from Brazil in 2011. I already had a bachelor's degree, so my intention was not to go back to school right away, if at all. I came across JCCC looking for ways to connect with my new community while I figured out my next steps. I started to volunteer on campus and, during one of my shifts, happened to run across a fair where several program representatives were available to talk to students about majors. Although this event was not meant for me, I felt compelled to talk to some of the staff and faculty anyway. The next thing I knew, I was enrolled and officially a JCCC student!

I was doing well in my classes and came across information about the Honors Program. I always thought college was meant for students straight out of high school. Being a bit older, having already been to college once, and not having studied in a few years, I almost ignored the Honors Program.

Thinking to myself “what am I even doing?” I reached out to the program director and set up a time to come in and talk. A part of me still felt like there was going to be a “but”: “But you’re too old.” “But your academic experience is from too far back.” Instead, I got a resounding “You’d be a great fit for this program and we’d love to have you!”

From that day on, I was supported by a variety of resources and opportunities that changed my life. I was able to participate in Honors contracts—additional coursework that allows you to deepen your knowledge of topics you find interesting. I was not only able to satiate some of my thirst for knowledge but also to connect one on one with professors who are still my mentors to this day. I received an Honors scholarship, which was crucial to my ability to remain in school during a time of financial instability in my life. I became an active member of the Honors Student Association (HSA), which organized fun events and opportunities for students to connect. I was able to meet other students, several who were the “traditional” students I pictured being part of the Honors Program but several more who were nontraditional like myself—reminding me that I was not alone in the unexpected twists and turns of life. The HSA made me feel a strong sense of belonging and community, and it gave me lifelong friends. I was also able to hone my leadership skills by becoming an HSA officer.

I had access to the Honors Lounge—a safe space to study, focus, and hang out with fellow honors students. But more importantly, I had the support of the various people who worked in the Honors office. They not only held me accountable to the academic milestones I had to achieve in order to be successful in the program but cared about me outside of my academic endeavors, too. They were there for me on days I was having trouble juggling life and studies, encouraged me when I thought I wouldn’t be able to achieve a goal, helped me find paths to success, and have kept in touch with me to this day.

It was finding JCCC’s Honors Program that helped me assuage my insecurities, academic or otherwise. It’s where I knew for certain that I was in the right place at the right time for what I needed to succeed in that phase of my life. Within the Honors Program, I found more than academic challenges and leadership opportunities—I found friends, people who cared about me beyond my grades, a sense of belonging, acceptance and understanding, a place that felt like home—and where I found my next steps.

The Honors Program made me love JCCC in a way I did not expect to, and it led me to seek out a career right here at the campus that welcomed

me and believed in me from Day One, even when—and especially when—I didn't believe in myself.

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