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How Honors Hoisted Me to DC and a Public Health Career

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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; transformative education; University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (TN)—Honors College

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In May of 2021, I moved to Washington, D.C. It was the middle of the pandemic. I had only been to D.C. once for a National Collegiate Honors Council conference. My partner was graduating law school and had just received a highly esteemed post-graduate fellowship in North Carolina. I was doing well in my global health job at Duke University. It would have been easy to stay static. Yet, we collectively came to the decision to move to a new place where we knew practically no one. I knew that I wanted to challenge myself and push my comfort levels to see what all was out there, professionally and personally. My experience in Honors literally gave me the exposure to this city and many others, but more importantly it gave me the tools and experience to bet on myself and try new things.

Like many, or maybe most, college students, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do when I enrolled my first year. I knew I wanted to "do good," whatever that meant. As a freshman, I was convinced that I would do good by becoming a lawyer, despite having never met a lawyer. At the advice of many, I double majored in business management and Spanish. After an immigration

law internship my freshman year, I quickly realized that law was not the path for me. After a few trial-and-error internships in local entrepreneurship, non-profits, and academic research, I still wasn't sure how I was going to "do good." I stumbled on the field of public health and global health sort of by accident through my first job out of college as a research analyst at an institute that was part of Duke University. Despite the fact that my alma mater did not have a public health degree, through the culmination of Honors classes and experiences I got to exactly where I needed to be to "do good."

Although my classes in business and Spanish were important bricks in my academic foundation, I would not have gotten to where I am today without my Honors program. Honors gave me the opportunity to explore passions and rabbit holes with extreme gentleness and supportiveness. Through honors programming and funding, I was able to go to Hungary and Austria and make a documentary on the post-Cold War perspective of nationality; I was able to camp in a yurt in Brooklyn through Partners in the Parks; and I was able to research comparative Spanish and Russian literature. In opposition to the age-old question of when I was going to use any of that in "real life," I use these experiences every day. I gained radical empathy, an insatiable appetite and curiosity for new things, and the ability to see that no issue is clearcut.

Although the Honors experience is often criticized for its exclusivity and cliquishness, my experience exposed me to new thoughts and peers who challenged me and continue to shape the person I am today. Whether in seminars, conversations at parties, or heated late-night debates in our student center, my peers made me confront my implicit biases and limited real-world experience. Simultaneously, I learned how to be an advocate for both myself and my story and for those around me. And this didn't end when I graduated; the alumnae from my honors program continue to push me to be and do better every day.

My experience as part of the honors community shaped me to be the public health advocate I aim to be today. I ultimately was able to choose a career in public health because of the tools, exposure, and skill sets that Honors gave me, and I hope that more and more students can be exposed to this experience in the years to come.

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