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Supportive and Impactful 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; first-generation college students; Eastern Kentucky University (KY)—Honors Program

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Most honors students arrive at college as academically motivated high-achievers. Rigorous honors coursework no doubt serves to sharpen these students' skills even further. But is it the rigor of coursework that transforms honors students into change agents in society? My experience in honors is that academic rigor alone is hardly the most important determinant of the long-term differences that honors education makes in the lives of students. Instead, the magic of honors comes from the ways in which challenging content is delivered in classroom and community settings that are energetically interactive, reflective, and supportive. Intentionality in building supportive educational as well as social communities propels honors programs and honors colleges to meaningful and transformative student development and long-term societal impact.

Many of us enter college with limited worldviews, restricted by minimal exposure to differing viewpoints and an absence of self-awareness and capacity for genuine and deep reflective thinking. For many if not most students, interactive learning in honors inevitably challenges biases and narrow worldviews. Most honors units emphasize diverse perspectives and challenge preconceived thought patterns through a foundation of core honors

coursework, enhancing students' critical thinking and breadth of engagement with other worldviews. Insightful discussion and targeted content aimed at broadening and deepening appreciation of diverse perspectives are central to the honors experience. Rigorous content without critical thinking and diversity appreciation may lead to advanced performance on some assessments, but it does not by itself prepare students for living a fruitful and inclusive life. Knowledge without perspective is incomplete.

As a first-generation college graduate, my experiences in honors fundamentally shaped who I have become over the twenty years since graduation. Luckily, my honors program was designed with all the beneficial characteristics noted above. I stepped onto campus sheltered, naïve, and incredibly timid. I had left my family to come to college and was wonderfully met with an unexpected new honors family on campus. I obtained housing in the honors residence hall where returning honors students instantly welcomed and guided newcomers like me. We immediately met enthusiastic faculty in classes where we debated views of philosophers previously unknown to us and evaluated human rights issues across various nations. From day one in honors, I found myself a member of a welcoming academic community that supported student development and emphasized faculty and student-peer connection and community. The bonds made with professors led to deep discussions about life goals and altered my plans for future educational and professional pursuits. They were not just my teachers; they were mentors and supporters. These days, as I am a professor myself and trainer of future education professionals, my honors experiences more than two decades ago continue to shape my current professional life. I attempt to build a similar supportive educational climate that is coupled with academically stimulating content. The concept of creating positive, safe, and supportive educational climates is interwoven across the courses that I teach, and it is my hope that my students will emphasize such importance in their future roles as school psychologists.

The impact of honors in my life extends far beyond my experiences in honors classrooms. Many honors units (including the one that I attended) offer cultural opportunities ranging from arts events to transformative study away and study abroad experiences. In my honors program, I especially recall participation in our traditional annual honors "cultural trips" (to New York City one year and New Orleans another) as landmarks in broadening my perspectives. So were my trips to and presentations at NCHC in Orlando in 1999, Washington, D.C., in 2000, and Chicago in 2001. Extending their reach

beyond the classroom, effective honors units help students become more invested and connected with peers and professors. Done well, honors education inspires lifelong academic reflection, connects students within networks of mentorship (as mentees and eventually mentors themselves), develops diverse perspectives, and produces well-rounded graduates. Through our honors communities, we achieve far more than we ever could alone.

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