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# A Safe Place to Explore: The Value of Honors in Higher 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; student engagement; Youngstown State University (OH)—The Sokolov Honors College

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Like many students who join Honors programs in college, I was first introduced to honors classes in high school. As someone who was identified as “gifted and talented” in elementary and high school, I was regularly at the top of my class academically as a child and adolescent. This earned me favor with both my parents and teachers, but it often alienated me from my peers. When you’re “that kid who always knows the answer” or “that kid who always gets an A,” you can be scorned by your peers rather than admired. While some individuals may thrive from this attention, I, like many others in similar situations, grew uncomfortable and tried to downplay a desire to learn and achieve in my effort to fit in with my classmates. Even within those high school honors classes, the competition for class rank and the implications for scholarships and college applications usurped the potential for camaraderie.

Honors programs in higher education present a different opportunity for high-achieving gifted and talented students. With the pressures of class rank and competition removed, the divide between students evaporates. Honors programs at this level allow students of similar abilities and interests to

connect and thrive together. There is a purity and authenticity to relationships which stem from these higher education honors programs because participants unite around common goals: the exploration of academic topics in greater depth, the desire to partner with others to serve their communities, the quest to challenge existing constructs and change the world.

It has been over twenty years since I became part of such an honors program, but the opportunities presented to me by joining my honors program have shaped my entire life, both personally and professionally. In lieu of feeling ostracized as an honors student, I discovered psychological safety with my peers in the honors program. In this group of high achievers, a love for learning became commonplace. Being surrounded by other students who enjoyed scholarship and research empowered me to delve into those subjects that interested me and, moreover, to share my academic passion with my peers. This honors community ignited a sense of excitement about the vast academic opportunities available. The respect and hunger for learning in each member of the program encouraged a pursuit of academic excellence focused not on personal achievement but rather personal fulfillment. Belonging to such a community removed previous barriers, such as the desire to fit in, and allowed me more fully to embrace my love of research and learning. As an undergraduate, I took specific honors courses, but I also had the ability to create my own honors projects and coursework in partnership with my professors. This freedom to explore topics of interest in greater depth with instructors made a lasting impression. While I majored in English, I took several honors courses pertaining to art and music. I spent an academic quarter analyzing a Beatles album. I took a geology course where I composed a collection of poems based on a local park. Being able to personalize learning and explore topics through projects resonated with me and my peers, and we witnessed a unique response from our instructors. Energized by student attention and creativity, professors shared their passions for their own areas of study. Such energy is contagious. Student enthusiasm reawakens enthusiasm in instructors and thereby enriches the honors community.

Belonging to such a community impacted me professionally. I've explored both corporate and healthcare work environments but find myself ultimately most comfortable in higher education where a focus on learning and research is valued. Within my department, I strive to cultivate a sense of community where we learn from each other and share resources. I created a social bookmarking group for my colleagues, where all are welcome to share resources. I encourage my employees to make time for professional development, and

together we explore common reads as a way of researching how new ideas can impact our work. Encouraging others to explore those specific areas of interest that appeal to them and to share their findings with others strengthens our team and ultimately creates a learning community. The elements of my honors program which had the greatest impact on me, a community where an appreciation of learning and achievement generates ongoing enthusiasm in oneself and others, are those that shape my world as a professional educator. I am grateful to be a product of an honors program, and I believe it has made me a better individual both personally and professionally.

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