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# Valuing Diversity

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Youngstown State University, 1998–2002

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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; collaborative learning; Youngstown State University (OH)—The Sokolov Honors College

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In 1998, when I entered Youngstown State, I had never heard of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), which is now considered to be one of the most critical investments a company can make in building toward success. Just because the focus had not come yet, though, does not mean that the principles were not impacting people's lives, including mine. At the core, an honors program exists to allow students who are academically strong access to additional resources, courses, and opportunities to test their strengths and push themselves further. This criterion naturally allows for students from a wide variety of backgrounds to come together with common goals. No one is required to participate in honors, and this self-selecting nature of the program allows students to know that everyone there is not only capable but also choosing to work harder, to do more, and to be their best, which is a unique starting point for building relationships.

The honors program at Youngstown State University was the first place where I was introduced to a program that spent time identifying and valuing students with a wide array of backgrounds, identifying similarities, finding common ground, and encouraging us to be our authentic selves. Prior to the honors program, I had an experience like most people in high school, seeing one right way to be, one right way to dress, talk, think, and though I was academically successful, I never felt like

I really understood quite how I fit or saw who I was as “good enough” for whatever social expectations I imagined to exist. When I moved into the honors dorm and entered the honors program, I suddenly found myself being a member of a community where we were all valued, regardless of whether we were passionate about theatre, math, music, or teaching. We all were recognized for having strengths that, if applied, could make the world better and make honors complete. The program was not a competition but a place where being at the top of your game was table stakes, and together we made each other stronger. I doubt I knew it at the time, but the idea that people are always doing their best stuck with me.

Throughout my professional career, I’ve always been driven by trying to find ways where my strengths could add value. In the last several years, as I’ve moved into more senior leadership roles, the best part of my job is learning about the unique backgrounds of my team members and finding ways to leverage those strengths for the improvement of the team in total. I work in IT, but I’ve hired and developed resources with backgrounds in art, history, philosophy, and more because I know that there are incredibly talented people in all disciplines, and I’m interested in hearing their stories and learning more about the value that they know they can bring to the team. Being part of the honors program helped me to see that I had something special and unique to contribute, but that there were also a lot of other very talented people around me who had something different, and equally valuable to give. It helped me to see my peers as resources, knowing who to go to because they were the expert in something where I needed help, and knowing I’d be willing to serve in the same capacity for others who needed my strengths. This exercise, recognizing my own value, valuing, rather than feeling threatened by others who were equal, or stronger than I was, and leveraging each other for both social and educational development were key to my experience in the program.

Today, DEI is a core focus of so many organizations, including mine. My foundational experiences of looking across a group of peers and knowing that each of us was different, unique, talented, and valued has paid dividends. When I build teams today, I’m not looking for a single set of skills, I’m looking for a complete set of team members who complement each other and push each other to be their best. That is what it feels like to be part of an honors program: everyone is strong—everyone works hard—and everyone has the same goal—to do good work and have fun, together.