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# Reflecting on Community: A Vision for the Future

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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; holistic education; SUNY Brockport (NY)—Honors College

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Being asked to reflect on the values I gained from my honors experience has been such a privilege, and I hope that my words can serve as a reminder to all who read them that we should never underestimate the power of reflecting on our practice—whatever that may be, inside of academia or otherwise. Having completed my undergraduate career five years ago and wanting to be very intentional with my response, I sat with this question for a few days and thought deeply about all the rewarding experiences I had through SUNY Brockport's Honors College. After moving beyond some of the practical skills and values that I gained through the academic rigor of my coursework, there was one word that came to mind which embodies both a core pillar of my experience and a value that stays with me today: community.

The Honors College at SUNY Brockport has a holistic focus on both academic and experiential learning. In addition to becoming independent and critical thinkers engaged in complex research, we were expected and encouraged to become active and responsible citizens engaged in the world around us. It was this emphasis on being leaders and building community from the

local to the global level that made all the difference for me. We each had the flexibility to shape the paths that made the most sense for our future goals. For example, mine took me to Saint Petersburg, Russia, for a summer and to Washington, D.C., for an internship at the U.S. Department of State that later opened a door to start my professional career there. My path also featured a very honors-specific niche. Early on, I became involved in our Honors Club, which served as the social branch of our program, and the Honors Peer Mentoring Program, which was established and has been run by students since 2000. Looking back on these experiences has proved to be more formative than I could have imagined at the time.

They gave me a community, showed me what that meant and how to foster it, and allowed me to find myself. These extracurricular activities created a space for us to grow and lead as individuals and as a collective, build relationships, and support one another. Through the mentoring program, we provided guidance and reassurance to new students throughout their first semester. We facilitated discussions around the challenges everyone was facing and worked together, as peers, to come up with creative solutions. Through the social club, we learned how to collaborate across differences and bring our visions to life for everything from community service projects to soirees in celebration of our peers' scholarly achievements. In addition to forming friendships with one another, we had the opportunity to deepen our networks with various clubs and departments across campus and engage with members of university leadership on our experiences and hopes for generations of students to come.

As I transitioned out of my undergraduate career through my first job and now into my graduate studies, the value of community and all the skills needed to develop it have stayed with me and made a significant impact on how I approach life. Indeed, it is at the very core of my academic and professional focus on conflict transformation and social justice. Although the pandemic disrupted our sense of community in many ways, it also created an opportunity for us to reimagine what community can mean and look like. As I write this in late February 2022, it's hard for me to imagine what the world will look like by the time you are reading this. However, I know that we will always have the ability to choose a path of unity over division. To walk that path, we must urgently recognize our shared humanity, communicate and build relationships with one another across differences, listen to and really *hear* one another's hopes and fears, and find ways to work together toward a more peaceful, just and inclusive future. We need community.

I'm grateful to all honors programs that prioritize the value of community and teach students like me how to bring that value to life every day. I'm also grateful, on this 100th anniversary, for the opportunity to reflect as it affords us a critical moment of clarity on our past, present, and future. Our experiences in honors programs nationwide and across the years connect us as a community and, whether we realize it or not, these types of connections exist all around us. We must dare to seek them out.

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