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Interdisciplinary Education Equips People to Face Unique Challenges

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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; integrative learning; University of New Mexico (NM)—Honors College

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Earning an undergraduate degree feels decidedly common today. 42% of Americans hold an undergraduate degree, and about 62% of all high school graduates attend some college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). What feels less common, however, is an education through an Honors College. As one of the first graduates to earn an Honors Interdisciplinary Liberal Arts degree from the University of New Mexico (something done by only a handful of students), I've had to explain what being an "Honors Major" means in every job interview, grad school proposal, and awkward small-talk conversation. Describing what Honors is and why it has value is an inevitable reality of pursuing an unusual degree path, and one I typically enjoy.

Earning a degree in Honors forces you to think critically about multiple disciplines, make connections between disparate fields (sometimes forcing professors from different colleges to get along on behalf of your research), and utilize new methodologies and theories. The value of a multidisciplinary

education can be a challenging thing to define, particularly in a nation where academia has long been divided distinctly by discipline.

Specialization has its benefits and has resulted in the majority of American scholarship produced in the past century. Specialization allows for more rigorous use of methods (because one is trained in a field's specific practices), and standards of research are easily regulated. Specialization, however, can come at the cost of the bigger picture or leave out important inputs and perspectives. In accepting the interconnected nature of the world, an Honors education bridges disciplines, making great strides and including varying points of view. Utilizing methods and literature from multiple disciplines is a challenge. One must read more, practice a variety of skills, and make tough decisions about which techniques are most pertinent to the ultimate research agenda. But in taking on these challenges, one can contribute in a much broader, applicable way. Disciplines often seem to believe they exist within a vacuum, but little in this globalizing world does.

In my undergraduate honors thesis, I was able to connect the fields of art history, psychology, and education to create and implement an arts curriculum to help high school girls communicate about difficult issues. My art history degree facilitated the creation of engaging projects embedded in the artistic history of the world and notions of beauty, while courses I took in educational psychology and curriculum development helped me connect with my students and measure outcomes of the course.

Now, I'm earning a PhD in cultural economics in the Netherlands. Although my program is offered through the School of History, Culture, and Communication, my research blurs lines between cultural economics, organizational theory, critical theory, philosophy, and sociology. This isn't a problem for my Dutch colleagues or advisors, who have encouraged the blending of methods and disciplines, urging that utilizing what is best for my particular project is the correct move, regardless of discipline.

Honors programs and colleges are allowing new researchers the incredible opportunity to try unusual combinations of methods, read more widely, and generally gain an understanding of the complexity of the world. Global problems and opportunities don't exist in a vacuum, so our educations shouldn't either. Being an interdisciplinary scholar is wonderful, but being an interdisciplinary human is even more so. Understanding the world (and one's role in it) from multiple perspectives makes one better equipped to face complex challenges. A background in Honors allows one to make decisions with the guidance of ideas from a multitude of perspectives.

Interconnected, complex challenges are the challenges we face today, and will face long into the future. Being equipped to handle these challenges is invaluable and necessary; an Honors education, focusing on collaboration and integration, provides us with the tools to successfully meet these challenges head on.

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