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2022

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# Finding My Place

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Northeastern Illinois University, 2019–2021

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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; Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC); Northeastern Illinois University (IL)—Honors Program

**Citation:** *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 2022, 23(1): 149–50

Each of us enters higher education with our own life experiences and beliefs. As a Black woman over forty, I was not your typical college sophomore. Returning to college full-time filled me with uncertainty, so unlike when I first began undergrad more than twenty years prior. A lifetime of highs and lows, failures and successes cultivated a certain fearlessness, yet I was unsure of where I might fit within the university culture. And then I was accepted into the University Honors Program.

“Scholar” was always a mantle I desired to carry. Although I’d spent my life exploring ideas and collecting knowledge on my own, being an Honors Scholar provided me a pass, a sort of permission, to explore ideas and better understand what I thought, while providing connections to challenge and reinforce those thoughts and ideas. I became a part of a community of people who were just as intimidated by the power of their own minds as I was, yet we continued to show up and do the work that never really felt like work. All the while, we lifted each other up, filling sagging sails with the winds of our encouragement.

My experience with Honors validated so many aspects of my identity that I hadn't realized I'd quieted. Over my life, I had found some personal success and stability. There was a certain pride I took in my achievements from my self-taught, Jill-of-all-trades-ness. But my passions, the subjects that got me on my feet and sucked into heated debates had no sustainable outlet. When I developed my first honors contract course proposal, I worried that my idea would be rejected by both my professor and Honors faculty because I didn't see anyone within my major and the small university circles in which I'd traveled discussing Blackness and media in the way I wished to explore. But when I finally opened my mouth and voiced my idea, I was met with encouragement and questions. There were so many animated conversations over the course of my tenure as an NEIU UHP Scholar, but there were also many challenges.

As a Communication, Media, and Theatre major and Mass Media minor, I believed my Honors Scholar status would challenge me to create and educate. Most importantly, I desired to be taught and led before I could lead and teach. The pushback I received during the development of my projects and thesis was deeply craved and welcomed. The team assembled provided a layer of accountability and critique that helped to refine my vision and my voice.

As I try to collect my thoughts into this essay, I've surprised myself by what I've accomplished as an Honors Scholar. My curiosity and passion have been activated, and as I finish my first term in graduate school, I'm more prepared than I'd given myself credit for. I have research. I have writings. I have video projects that demonstrate my calling to amplify authentic representations of Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) in film and television. My aim is to center BIPOC identities through the exploration of positive representations and fill the gaps in documentation and scholarly research in Media Studies. In our twenty-first-century society, I too must be able to present my work in a variety of media because I am a Scholar and a Creative Consultant. These are both vocations and callings.

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