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Is Honors Worth the Extra Effort?

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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; transformative education; University of Hartford (CT)—Honors Program

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When many students think about participating in an honors program, their minds immediately rush to harder courses and more work. Frankly, many brilliant classmates did not pursue the honors program because they did not see the benefit. They failed to recognize the implicit value of pursuing a program that is simultaneously challenging and nurturing. Although I did not notice it each day, the honors program had a major impact on my college and professional journey.

My experience in the honors program highlighted the importance of flexibility. In my college's honors program, students could make standard courses into honors courses by developing an honors contract. Rather than being confined to the traditionally offered honors courses, this option allowed me the flexibility to delve deeper into subjects of interest. For the honors contract for my *Hunger: Problems of Scarcity and Choice* course, I volunteered at Foodshare, a local non-profit focused on eliminating food insecurity, and presented my reflections. This non-traditional classroom experience instilled the need for volunteerism, something I have integrated into my post-grad life. Without the flexibility of these contracts, I never would have had this opportunity.

The value of originality was instilled throughout my honors experience. When I was deciding on a focus for my final honors project, I remember being shocked by how open my advisor was to my ideas. I expected there to be strict guidelines, but rather I was able to create a project that aligned with my passions. I completed groundbreaking research to determine if axial rotation could be reliably measured in children with cerebral palsy. This involved creating an original device, testing children, analyzing data, synthesizing results, and eventually publishing the findings. This project never felt like additional work because I was genuinely invested in the research. I also gained meaningful leadership experience while managing a team of three research assistants. In the workforce, leadership skills and the ability to work well with others are essential.

My classmates showed me the value of a supportive, rather than competitive, community. I assumed that a class of high-achieving students would result in competition and jealousy. To my surprise and delight, my classmates were focused on challenging each other and growing together. In the workforce, it is easy to get distracted by others' successes. This value grounds me in the significance of a supportive community and the desire to learn and grow with, rather than against, others.

My biggest takeaway from the honors program was openness. Openness in expressing what I wanted or needed. Openness to experiences and opportunities. My career journey has deviated greatly from my original plan. I planned to complete the Doctor of Physical Therapy program immediately following my three-year accelerated bachelor's degree. However, once I started taking courses and exploring other interests through honors contracts, I realized I was passionate about various topics. I was open with advisors regarding my career. I was open about my desire to explore other subjects, passions, and careers. I was open about my aspiration to complete a full research project for my honors project. I learned that being open usually results in opportunities and support. Through these experiences, I determined that physical therapy was not the field for me. My final honors project opened new doors in the neuromuscular research world which ultimately led to my first job. I worked as a Clinical Research Coordinator in the neuromuscular program at Boston Children's Hospital. The value of openness has followed me into my adult life also. I realized that I wanted to explore the business side of healthcare, which led me to my current role and pursuit of a Master in Business Administration degree. The twists and turns of my career trajectory are the result of my openness to new opportunities and experiences.

The honors program allowed me to learn and grow in a supportive community. I was given flexible learning options that afforded me the opportunity to explore passions outside my major. In addition, I was able to develop an original study, which sparked one of the many changes in my career journey. Looking back, the freshman-year me would have been baffled by how open I was in asking for what I needed and accepting new experiences. This evolution of character can largely be attributed to my experiences in the honors program, which proved to be meaningful in ways beyond academics.

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