

My Four Years as a Concordia Fellow by Gianna Zonghetti, Class of 2010

As I sit in my advanced writing class during my last semester of college, I am asked to evaluate and interpret my academic career in ways I have never done before. Looking back on my previous schooling, I start to wonder if I really have learned as much as I could have over the years, and if other people have had a similar educational experience to mine. I glance around the classroom and see a very diverse group of people who I think could not possibly share the same story as I, but with no way of knowing that for sure. I think about how no one could know my story just by looking at me, and how some might be very surprised to hear that story.

As a student, I always did well without ever trying very hard. Learning and memorizing information has always come easily to me and I never thought twice about the fact that it does not come that easily for everyone. From the time I was in elementary school, all the way to when I finished high school, I relied on my natural abilities to get exceptional grades. I never did more than was asked of me and was never compelled to study any topics further than what I had learned in class. Throughout my entire experience I was also able to obtain many academic honors and awards, ranging from “Citizen of the Month” in elementary school, to being in the National Honor Society in high school. It was not until I got into college and was accepted into the Fellows Program that I realized that it is not just about getting good grades and several accolades, but it is about truly learning something and being able to grow academically inside and outside of the classroom. After my acceptance into the Fellows Program, I felt that I had been given an opportunity to grow as a student, and I was hoping that it would not be too late for me to change my ways of coasting along on my natural academic abilities.

I came to college nervous about the academic challenges that were before me, but excited to open this new chapter. After only a week of being on campus I received notice that all the Fellows students must attend a meeting the following week. As I mentally prepared to attend the meeting, I realized that it was now time for me to see what I was really capable of, and how I could potentially grow. The meeting rapidly approached and, before I knew it, I was walking to the meeting feeling extremely anxious and unsure of what I would experience.

As the meeting started and I met some of the other students in the Honors Program, I realized that I might be in over my head. Until that point, I had never felt academically inferior to anyone because I was always the type of student who did well in all of her classes and was the first person to raise her hand with the right answer. Within this group of people, though, I saw others who were nothing like me academically or socially. Out of a group of about twelve students, I was the only athlete, which I am sure led others to believe I really did not belong in this group. At the time I felt that they just may have been right. These other students had knowledge that went way beyond the classroom, which is exactly what I was lacking. I, like most students, had never made it a priority to do any learning aside from what was required by my teachers.

The honor students attended this introductory meeting to discuss the events in which we wanted to take part as a group, and to suggest possible topics for our upcoming spring seminar. When the Fellows director started asking in what types of events we were interested, not one academic thought entered my mind. The other students all knew of great museums, galleries, and plays they wanted to attend, while I knew what time the Yankee game was airing that night. In my head I wondered if this was normal for these types of students, and if the honor students were supposed to be so enlightened and knowledgeable about all areas of academia outside of the

classroom. This meeting led me to question whether or not I truly had what it took to be an honor student. At that moment, it seemed the opposite of what I was.

After this experience, the title of “Honor Student” seemed to take on a meaning I had never considered during my high school years. The “College Honor Student” is well versed in all areas of study, not just her own. They push themselves to take as many classes as they can every semester, without thinking about what a great challenge they are assuming. The honor student is one who puts schoolwork before anything else, and is not happy getting the required 3.5 GPA, but strives for the 4.0 GPA. They are the ones who know what art galleries are opening in New York City that month and what Broadway plays based on works of literature they have read are showing. They are the students who ruin “the curve” for everyone else in their classes. They are without a doubt the best students in each of their graduating classes. Was I prepared to fit this mold? Not in the slightest. Could I figure out how to make it work within my realm of capabilities? Yes.

By my second semester of college as a Fellow I was enrolled in a seminar with these “College Honor Students” and was extremely intimidated. I was worried that I would not be able to keep up with these older students, who I believed were more intelligent than I. The seminar topic was “All You Need Is Love”, on which I had some insights, but felt it was too subjective of a topic for me to be bold enough to state my opinions. For the first few classes I was extremely shy and unwilling to express my thoughts. The only time I participated was when the instructor forced me to, and I never freely gave my opinion. I remember having many ideas about what I wanted to say, but never finding the courage to just raise my hand and say what I was thinking. As the seminar progressed through the semester, I eventually felt more and more comfortable as I realized that there was no reason to worry because the classroom was where I could excel. I did not need any outside knowledge to discuss what was being taught in the classroom. By the end of the seminar I had become one of the most talkative students in class, and realized that there was no reason to think that my ideas are not valid, just because I do not know some miniscule detail about the works of William Shakespeare. Through this experience I was able to learn that being knowledgeable in the classroom does not necessarily mean that you are knowledgeable outside the classroom, and each form of knowledge can offer different things. Through this seminar I was able to change my concept of the “College Honor Student”.

My idea of the “College Honor Student” transformed the way I saw myself and now, in my own right, I have become this type of student. This student is someone who is able to beat the odds and prove others, and themselves, wrong. It is a student who is not afraid to share her ideas even if she feels she is different from others. It is a student not ashamed of being different anymore, but rather proud of the alternative view she can bring to the table. It is a student who, regardless of her involvement with athletics or drama club, can be successful in the classroom. It is a student who progresses, no matter what her academic achievements are prior to college education. The honor student is now a student who is not going to be scared of being great.

After reading a chapter from Rodriguez’s book Hunger of Memory, I was able to realize even more about my own education and how I was able to become comfortable with myself as an honor student. Throughout his book, Rodriguez discusses that his classroom life and home life had always been kept separate for reasons that mostly stemmed from the language and cultural barrier being created by his education. I find my school life and home life to be very separate as well, but for very different reasons. I had always done what I had to at school and then focused on other things, such as basketball, when I was away from school. I never really felt a connection to education once the bell rang at the end of the school day, which I can say I very much regret

now. I have recently, through a college education, come to realize that education is something in which you need to succeed in all areas of life, and the more you know the better off you are.

In Rodriguez's book I was also able to see things I admired and would like to accomplish myself. Rodriguez explains how both at school and at home he could not get enough of reading and saw how it would benefit him in the long run. I never really saw reading the way he did and did not realize how it would be beneficial to me in my future. He believed that it is a necessity to read all the classics, and reading only for pleasure is simply unacceptable. Classical is the only type of reading I do. Even while reading the classics at my high school, I never took the time to try and get something valuable out of them.

I, like most high school students, read these classics because it was required. As I read them, I was constantly highlighting and rereading things on which I thought I might be tested, and not really taking the time to thoroughly enjoy the novels. One of my high school teachers would actually ask questions on quizzes such as "what was the color of the main character's dress in chapter 3?" With questions like these, it was nearly impossible to read a book and get something valuable out of it. Every few lines I would have to stop and memorize what color a person was wearing or the exact name of the car they were driving. I wish that at that time I had cared more about what I was reading, because now I find it slightly embarrassing that I have not read such classics as The Great Gatsby and Pride and Prejudice. I have to ask myself if not having read these classics really does make me any less of an "honor student".

Is a "College Honor Student" defined by how many classics they have read or how many classes they have taken outside of their major? Through my experience, I have come to find that there is no one type of honor student. I think that there is no single path that can bring a student to that title, but rather many different paths that lead them all to success. I think it is a drive and a thirst for knowledge that guides someone to become an honor student. I did not come to college wanting to learn as much as I could, but I am leaving college wanting that. Through my encounters in the world of the "College Honor Student" I have come to greatly value my education and appreciate what it will offer to my future endeavors. For me, the end of college is the beginning of my education because it has opened so many new doors for me.