

Mothers in Honors

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The University of Maine's 2012 valedictorian, honors student Rachel Binder-Hathaway, gave her graduation speech via Skype last May as she had already begun a yearlong Fulbright Scholarship in Bangladesh. Rachel was putting to use her business and economics degrees, traveling to numerous villages in an effort to determine various best practices in microfinance while also isolating ineffective program elements. She intended to help Bangladeshi women grow their own successful small businesses and thus work their way out of relentless and abject poverty. Rachel is committed to assisting these women, who would otherwise have few opportunities outside the home, to create sustainable work for themselves and, in so doing, finally achieve their full potential.

The goal of fully achieving one's potential is likewise central to our UMaine honors college mission, and Rachel represents an ideal, wholly evolved honors student who not only has excelled academically but has developed a keen sense of herself as a global citizen and an agent for change. Rachel was also somewhat on the margins in honors, though, as the single mother of a terrific young teenager, Jacob, who has travelled far and wide with her—to Bangladesh, India, and the UMaine Honors Center. Motherhood can make a student exceptionally motivated but can also situate her as non-traditional in honors. We will consider the implications of this nontraditional status for three mothers and suggest how honors colleges might better integrate dedicated student mothers into their programs.

Rachel originally left college to launch a career as a professional jazz singer in New York. When she became a mother, her priorities changed, and she returned to school to triple major in finance, accounting and financial economics, graduating with high honors.

Rachel:

I have always thrilled to the idea of realizing my full potential. As such, I had many academic and personal goals in mind as I worked toward fulfilling my long-anticipated collegiate dreams.

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Among my objectives was the pursuit of greater knowledge simply to fulfill my love of learning, and the honors curriculum was a huge part of this quest. Honors provided a fuller, richer experience that heightened my overall academic experience, moving me beyond the number-crunching and economics-based learning I gained in the colleges of business and economics. I viewed the honors curriculum as a chance to enhance my current aptitudes and to discover new ones.

However, there is much more to my story than this. Beyond my love of learning there stood a unique reason for seeking an education. He is a thirteen-year-old boy with curly brown hair and a charming disposition. My long- and short-term parental goals center on providing the best life possible for my son, Jacob. My responsibility and even more my joy is to see that he has a stable home life, a strong education, a safe community environment, and a happy childhood. I realized that if I was to see these goals to fruition, I needed to excel within the university environment, thus providing (I surmised) the upward trajectory we needed to create a bright and secure future.

I have always been a motivated individual, but motherhood shifted my focus away from personal wants and needs. My priorities now revolved around the needs of my son, and, because I was a single parent, this need to provide was heightened dramatically. My path has not always been easy, yet I am glad to have walked a few miles in these shoes, thus opening my eyes to the plight of mothers everywhere, especially those who struggle to provide for their families with little hope of realizing their aspirations for a better life. I carry them with me.

With this maternal (or paternal) instinct comes a sense of focus and determination. I believe this unique perspective lends itself to academic success. As mothers, we do not just like the idea of succeeding but need to succeed. We are moved to action not for ourselves but for the children relying on us. I believe that universities and especially honors programs should actively seek people with this level of determination and help cultivate their gifts. Our nontraditional perspective can enrich the overall honors experience, not just for us as mothers within the program but for younger students and preceptors who likewise benefit from expanded classroom diversification, a greater variety of experiences, and new points of view.

Paige Mitchell (class of 2009), another mother in honors, began her career at UMaine with a 4.0 in her first semester but then floundered and

withdrew her second semester. She returned to school when she became pregnant, finding support and acceptance from our late honors dean, Charlie Slavin. “I f****d up,” Paige told Charlie. “Yes, you did f**** up. Do you plan to f**** up again?” he asked, and then he invited her back into the college. Paige graduated from honors with a double concentration in her English major, writing an honors thesis that integrated her daughter Lilly’s artwork. She graduated from the honors college with highest honors and has since earned her master’s in English and currently teaches English courses at UMaine, works as the ESL specialist in the writing center, and studies French. Paige plans to pursue an MA in French and a subsequent PhD in English. She describes her intense commitment to academic work upon returning to school as a mother.

Paige:

When I returned to the university, I realized my chances of success were slim: I was a single, pregnant woman, I had already failed and withdrawn from the university, and I had a late-night job and a pathetic apartment. Yet I was determined not only to survive but to do well.

After Lilly was born, I struggled to find childcare so I could attend classes and lectures. I struggled with balancing my time between attending classes, taking care of Lilly, and working. I learned quickly that babies are time-consuming and expensive, so I worked three jobs to support my daughter. I decided that, since my time was strained, I would devote my full energy to everything. And that is what I did.

I got all As, I never missed a class, and I doted on Lilly. I learned that, with a child, your reasons for succeeding are stronger because the focus is not just on yourself; the consequences of failure are so much greater. Yet what is of peculiar interest is that I decided to expend my energy in all directions out of spite. I knew the odds were against me as a single mother and as a nontraditional student surrounded by a population who saw me as an outcast, as someone who did not belong in the same classroom as them.

Emily Patrick (class of 2013) is a fourth-year major in wildlife ecology with a minor in anthropology who learned that she was pregnant after her second year of school. Though not a single mother like Rachel and Paige, she functions as one much of the time because her daughter Jaclyn’s father often travels for work. Emily, like Rachel and Paige, describes the profound difference motherhood has made in her academic pursuits.

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Emily:

Not to sound arrogant, but school has always been easy for me. My challenge has always been to find meaning in life, not to get good grades. As a result, I often found myself skipping class and only learning what I needed to pass the exams during my first two years of school.

After finding out I was pregnant and especially after giving birth, all of that changed. Jaclyn gave my life meaning, and, as a result, I have learned to take school much more seriously and have had perfect attendance for the first time in my life.

The same holds true for my honors courses. HON 180, however, posed a special challenge because I had to attend local cultural events without my daughter—in one case, a “sound poetry” reading—and it was the first time I had left my daughter outside of class time since she had been born. It helped me prepare for her being in daycare. Leaving her is always difficult, but it does get easier as time goes by.

Each of these women demonstrates the sort of scholarly drive one hopes to find in an honors student, which might lead one to believe that honors would be a natural home for them. However, motherhood is statistically rare among our honors students, a population constituted by a disproportionately high number of traditional-age, non-parent students relative to the broader university. Of our current 791 UMaine honors students, 99% fall within the seventeen- to twenty-two-year-old age range. Of these students, 56% are women, with only a miniscule (unmeasured) fraction being mothers.

Though Rachel, Paige, and Emily have been stellar students, clearly of the caliber and character one would find commensurate with honors, each described feeling in various ways marginalized or unaccepted.

Rachel:

Although honors was an important part of my collegiate experience, I often walked out of class feeling a vague sense of disconnect, as if an unbridged distance existed between me and the other honors students.

Connections with preceptors [instructors] formed naturally, perhaps reflecting the fact that we shared a shift in perspective that tends to flower over time. Other students did not lack perspective and wisdom; in fact, I learned a great deal from them during our classroom

discussions. I enjoyed getting to know my classmates as individuals, too, but an invisible divide definitely did exist. At times, I felt that students were uninterested in my thoughts and contributions. During these times, I was aware of reactions that I can only liken to behaviors I displayed as a teen when required to interact with teachers or my parents. (Sorry, Mom!) Of course, many special moments counterbalanced this sense of isolation, but generally there was a divide.

Paige also described at times feeling like an outsider even though she had intentionally pursued the honors college as a place to find an academically rigorous community.

Paige:

At first I was a tangible outcast. I joined the honors college in my third trimester. I was huge. Some students in my preceptorial would chat with me and ask to feel the baby. Others would stare and not include me in conversations among non-pregnant students.

This exclusion is understandable since I am sure I was a shock to traditional-age students, who do, and rightfully should, have a different agenda. They are here to learn, yes, but also to socialize, to experience life outside their parents' home, and to explore larger horizons. Clearly I had already participated in some noticeable social experiences.

Because of the divide, I avoided including my life experiences as a single mother in class discussions; I felt they were both tacitly and explicitly undesired. Yet traditional students routinely connect course texts to personal anecdotes, to boyfriends and girlfriends, or to their high school experiences. I noticed that they would share these anecdotes with a sense of natural entitlement as if they were confident that their personal histories had academic merit, that they connected profoundly with Inanna, Aristotle, and W. E. B. Du Bois.

Many of these students were clearly bright but also cocky. They saw the merit in their associations but not in mine. I found this mind-set intimidating, and I learned to bite my tongue and to silence contributions that my age and experience could have offered.

Although rare, I have seen this attitude modeled by professors. During one preceptorial, my preceptor was reviewing all of our essays prior to handing them back. When he got to mine, he stopped, looked up, pointed at me, and asked, "How old are you?" In a class

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of five other students, I was embarrassed and anxious. I could only stammer that I was twenty-five, and as I admitted my age in front of a room full of traditional students, I heard giggles and saw sneers. My professor did not direct this question to anyone else, and he let the uncomfortable silence remain.

Emily remarked on the distance she felt from other students after having had Jaclyn. In particular, she expressed frustration with traditional-age students' profligate use of time.

Emily:

I most definitely feel isolated from my peers. Their issues now seem insignificant to me, and the lack of sleep that comes with being a mother makes it even harder for me to be sympathetic at times. Group projects pose a problem because many students my age want to do things at the last minute, at night, or on weekends, and daycare is closed during these times! My life requires careful planning now, and it is hard for other students to understand and/or respect that. Having a child has made it hard to relate to other students my age.

Each of these honors mothers describes having felt more connected to older students, faculty, and staff. All of the women remarked upon the openness and support of our late dean, Charlie Slavin. Paige described another mother whose thesis Charlie advised. When that mother brought her son to their meetings, Charlie would afterwards play soccer with him in the honors hallway. Paige commended several faculty members for their understanding, seeing them as likeminded people willing to go out of their way. Emily added, "The faculty and staff at the University of Maine have been amazing!"

They each, furthermore, had suggestions for how to improve and expand experiences for mothers in honors.

Rachel:

I owe a great debt of gratitude to Charlie Slavin, Dean of the Honors College. When I enrolled at UMaine, I wrote to him requesting entry into the college. Had I not taken the initiative, or had Charlie said no, I would have missed out on one of the most important elements of my undergraduate career.

I feel that my means of entry into the honors college supports the value of including mothers as nontraditional honors students. It also indicates that honors colleges and admissions teams often overlook important student segments during the admissions process. By

widening the selection pool and considering those students who are not fresh out of high school, we create a more diversified student body, which has a positive impact on honors programs.

Honors preceptors can be leaders in this expansion movement by sparking conversations about ways to attract and retain nontraditional groups. Promoting an honors culture of sensitivity and inclusion is also important to those nontraditional students who have already gained entrance into the program. Many mothers experience barriers to entry and to program continuation. We face parental responsibilities and unique resource restrictions that can adversely affect our ability to participate fully. If systematic accommodations are made for mothers, I expect retention rates for these students would rise dramatically.

Preceptors also have an important role to play as they set the tone within the classroom. The behaviors they model and sensitivities they display can help create an environment in which all students feel welcomed and comfortable. Insensitivity toward mothers does exist among traditional honors students, and it can create a sense of disconnect for nontraditional students in the group. This lack of group cohesion is more easily overcome when students see preceptors modeling increased sensitivity and when preceptors encourage students to act in kind.

Paige corroborates Rachel's claims about the need for more creative and inclusive admissions processes.

Paige:

It's time for the honors college to reconsider their admissions process. Doing so will benefit traditional students and reach out to a population that typically excels in academia but remains marginalized. Traditional students are recruited to the honors college right out of high school and so, understandably, are selected based on their transcripts. Once a transcript satisfies the appropriate standards, high school students receive an official letter and invitation to join the honors college.

By looking only at high school transcripts, however, the honors college ostracizes nontraditional students and renders them invisible. This method also works to instill a sense of entitlement in traditional students and reinforces an uncomfortable division between them

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and nontraditional students, who feel that their presence is neither encouraged nor desired.

A former professor who was a graduate of the UMaine honors program recommended the honors college to me. Were it not for this professor, I might have found out about the program too late or not at all. New criteria and revised methods for recruiting students need to be implemented. A transcript cannot measure the academic merit of nontraditional students, and clearly a transcript seems a pathetic measure when it comes to a mother's accomplishments.

Emily Patrick argues further that the honors college should actively recruit mothers and then have structures in place to support their work.

Emily:

Single mothers who have still succeeded academically are much more accomplished (at least in my opinion) than cohorts who have the same grades but haven't faced the same challenges. It takes "true grit" and an impressive work ethic to be a mother, let alone a single mother.

Not only could single mothers be a huge asset to the honors college, but mothers need to know that they can succeed, that others see them as valuable, and that they have the right to better themselves. Mothers are often already at a disadvantage because they put themselves last. I often felt guilty going to class after Jaclyn was born because I felt selfish and frivolous. Encouragement is thus especially important to mothers seeking an excellent education in honors.

My advice is to hold us to the same academic standards but to make scheduling and logistics more flexible. Sometimes we need to take our own vehicles to events and field trips. Sometimes we need to keep our phones on in class in case of an emergency. Group projects can also pose problems because our peers would rather work on projects at midnight the day before they are due, and we just cannot be that flexible. Teachers should expect us to put in the effort but understand that what works for other students just does not work for us any longer. Perhaps teachers could, for instance, email readings to us ahead of time.

Most importantly, if we reach out, talk to us! Every mother faces different challenges, and it is important that a professor and student come up with appropriate solutions that are satisfactory to all parties before there is a problem.

If we listen and talk to these honors mothers, they offer sage advice. They argue convincingly that they are motivated, focused students who bring rich diversity to our programs. They further report disturbing marginalization and isolation that could be ameliorated with support and increased sensitivity on the part of administrators, faculty, and students alike. They propose expansion of admissions criteria that might allow for increased recruitment of these excellent students as well as structural changes to support their retention. As these mothers in many ways represent the ideal honors student, we need to integrate them fully into our honors programs and to help sustain their work. Not only will the women and their children clearly benefit, but honors programs and colleges will move toward achieving our full potential through the wholehearted inclusion of these remarkable women.

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