

Honors at Iowa Commendation Ceremony | Student Remarks

2013 Student Speaker | Elizabeth Schorsch, History, Educational Policy

When Kelly asked me to be the student speaker tonight, I wasn't quite sure how to react because what she said was, "we thought you'd be the most interesting choice." Not really sure what you were getting at, Kelly, but after I thought about it, it made sense. Perhaps I might be an interesting person to represent this year's Honors students because I don't fit the typical Iowa student demographic. I'm not from Iowa, nor am I from the Chicago suburbs. I'm from Chicago, the city—and while my Chicago pride for the past 4 years has become a constant joke amongst my friends, where I come from has undoubtedly shaped the experience I've had at this university, an experience for which I am extremely grateful. I know that this is specifically an Honors commencement, but to make any sense I need to talk about Honors, the university, and Iowa City, all together because they've all had a hand in what has been a transformative last four years for me.

Iowa is the place where I started to enjoy being outside again... for the first time since I was a little kid. It was where I started running, with long, quiet runs along the river through tranquil City Park and beautiful Hickory Hill. Iowa was the first place I learned that food is grown by people, like actually real people, farmers with families. Like the students from Western Iowa I've lived with for the past two years who have made sure we have fresh eggs and chicken in our fridge at all times. Finally, Iowa was the first place where I had a lot of space to breathe—where I could look up and actually see the whole sky around me. I remember returning to my neighborhood in Chicago my sophomore year, going out for a run, and feeling closed in and suffocated. When you run around a typical Chicago neighborhood, and you look up, you see power lines, and rooftops, and lightpoles. There's very little room to breathe or think, very little space to appreciate like there is here.

I realize that perhaps little of what I've described seems to have anything to do with the university or the honors program. But really all of these things encapsulate the Iowa scholar—whether an undergrad or a professor—from whom I've learned so much over the past four years. The Iowa scholars are people who love to read and question, solve problems and create new ideas, but who also live every day with a visceral connection to that which is around them and that which is alive. They are the honors students working in the university garden or planning programs for Iowa City Summer of Solutions. The students with straight A's who feel most natural playing ultimate Frisbee outside all day, or the History professors who I've passed running the trails at Hickory Hill. The writers lying in the grass with nothing but their notebooks. What I've encountered among the intellectual life here, among the scholars here, is a lifestyle that is so much more holistic and connected to the real living world than a stereotypical existence dedicated to data, books, and stuffy, lonely offices.

I'm not 100% sure what it is about the environment here that fosters this type of life, but when I reflect on my last four years, I keep returning to the idea of non-competitiveness. The people here—the top students in this room, the professors, even the runners and outdoor athletes I've encountered out and about— all want to do their best, but at the same time they want their community and their surrounding environment to be beneficial and beautiful for everyone. This atmosphere has been especially valuable to me not only because I get to look up at a big open sky but also because I came from a very academically rigorous, very competitive high school, which I think many of my fellow Honors grads can understand. When I first got here my freshman year, it was difficult to separate competitiveness from a desire to learn. It was difficult to weed out the superficial expectations of others from my own core principles, and it was difficult to focus on what is good rather than what is impressive. But the people in Honors, at the University, and in Iowa City have taught me how.

Last year, I applied for the hyper competitive Truman scholarship with two other Honors juniors, and in reality we were all competing against each other for a very small number of national awards. What ended up happening, and what happens with what I'd say most of these scholarships here, is that those of us who were technically competing against each other—Nic Pottebaum, Connor Spinks, and I—were actually workshopping our applications together for months, under Kelly's leadership and with Art's help as well. We contributed hours reading each others drafts and offering feedback so that each of us could put together the best possible application, even though in the end we were up against each other for this prestigious scholarship. I remember shortly after Connor won, I ran into Nic, and we were just so happy for her, so excited for her, and so proud and inspired to have worked with her during the process.

That's the kind of non-competitive atmosphere I've valued most about our Honors Program as well as this university and larger Iowa community in general. I think it's what allows the scholars here to enjoy and care about their whole quality of life beyond research and grants. It allows them to value and appreciate their environment, the outdoors, and where their food comes from—and it makes contributing to and honoring their Iowa community a regular part of life. When we cut out the distraction of competing against each other and work to be our own best selves as our duty to one another, it is much easier to live good lives. With that, I'd like to thank my fellow Honors graduates, the Honors staff, and our university faculty for teaching this kid from the Northwest side of Chicago how to live a balanced life. Thank you parents, family, and friends for helping us all get to this point. My fellow graduates, I wish you all the best, as you try to live your own good lives, whatever that entails, deeply connected to the life and community around you. Before you leave, I'd like to say, take one last slow walk through the Pentacrest, go play on the playground at College Green, and inhale the last sweet smells of an Iowa City summer night. Finally, take the time to look up and appreciate the big open sky we have here and all the space it's given us to live and breathe and move on to our next step. Congratulations Honors class of 2013. On Iowa and Go Hawks.