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January 6, 2026

University Honors Program Portfolio Reflection

The approaching end of my journey at North Carolina State University and the University Honors Program (UHP) has prompted deep reflection on the experiences that have shaped who I am today. When I started university four years ago, I never thought the time would go by this rapidly. The fact that I am almost leaving my self-made college family and the place I ended up calling home is daunting because I will be going into a phase of my life that is still completely unknown. These past years of my life have brought me so much joy, adventure, friends, experiences, and knowledge that I will never forget. With my undergraduate diploma almost in my hands, it is the perfect time to look back at these phenomenal years to revisit all the things I have accomplished and all the ways that I have grown as a person and student.

My dream of going to college in the US after finishing my high school in The Netherlands, which is where I am from, was about to come true when I got accepted into NC State in 2022. When it was finally time to move to North Carolina that fall, I felt like the most exciting parts of my life were just around the corner. The most thrilling thing that I could think of at that time was moving into my freshman dorm and meeting my roommate. Little did I know that my roommate would become my best friend and that I would have an even more amazing time studying in the US than I had anticipated. When I first enrolled in NC State, I was an Architecture major. At the time, I thought it was the perfect career for me to be able to combine my artistic and technical skills. However, within the first week of classes, I told my advisor I wanted to switch my major. She had never heard of anyone wanting to switch that quickly. Even though I was sure of my decision because I noticed architecture was not for me, I quickly had to

decide what I actually wanted to major in. My mind kept thinking about Computer Science since that was something I wanted to do as a child. This choice immediately excited me since it would still allow me to combine my technical and creative skills while also enhancing my interests in coding, video games, and the inner workings of computers that I have had since I was a kid. I switched to Computer Science and never looked back as the classes were immediately a place where I felt at home.

With uncertainty about my major and just coming from The Netherlands, I did not know what an honors program was or meant. Therefore, during my entire first semester at NC State, I was not a part of the UHP. When my roommate mentioned the program during our second semester, we both decided to join and it was the best decision I could have made at that time. The immediate community I felt and the endless possibilities it gave was what made it extraordinary. During this first year, I was a part of the honors forum, which is a requirement of the honors program where the student must go to at least twelve cultural events throughout the semester. The honors forum allowed me to go to events such as ballets, plays, operas, museums, crafternoons, and much more. Having the requirement to go to events like these was so nice to make sure my life did not consist of only studying and attending class. After the first year was over, I was elated to see what the next year would bring.

When the long summer after freshman year was finally over, I was extremely excited to start my next year at NC State. After joining UHP in the first year, I decided to move into a dorm in the honors quad for sophomore year. Living in the quad made my college experience even more memorable because of the amazing community within the quad and the convenience getting to honors events. I was especially excited for this year because I could finally start taking more Computer Science classes. One of those classes was CSC281: Interactive Game Design. I

wanted to see what video game design would be like since that is one of the most creative sectors within Computer Science. I really enjoyed this class and ended up making a video game with a team of which I am enormously proud. We made a puzzle escape room game, and I was the artist for it. The development of this game helped me evolve my digital art and storytelling skills and it taught me the full process of making a simple video game. This year, I also started taking honors seminars. Honors seminars are classes that the honors program offers to help students experience graduate-style classes that show how multiple different disciplines approach real-world problems. Honors students are required to take two of these classes and the first one I took was HON202: Shakespeare and Leadership. In this class, we read four Shakespeare plays and analyzed them to discover more about how leadership was depicted in the societies in which these plays were written. Within this class, I wrote a couple of essays conducting that analysis. This class also offered a trip to Staunton, Virginia to view a Shakespeare play in person. I felt so lucky to be a part of the honors program during that trip because amazing experiences like that do not happen in any regular class. During sophomore year, I also fulfilled another honors requirement, which was taking two approved coursework classes. These are advanced classes that have an honors section of the class or regular classes where the student sets up an honors contract with the teacher to make the class more challenging. I took two honors section classes, which were Physics 2 and Calculus 3. Sophomore year was filled with experiences in regards with the honors program because of the honors forum, honors seminars, honors approved coursework classes, and living in the honors quad. It was a year to remember.

During the summer after sophomore year, my roommate and I decided to study abroad. During sophomore year, we attended the study abroad fair which sparked our interests at first. We decided to go to Prague in The Czech Republic, since NC State has a satellite campus there

and it was a place I had not been to before. Going to Prague for the summer was one of the best decisions I ever made. I did not only get to continue studying and taking interesting classes throughout the summer, but I also got to travel to places I had never been, meet people I would never have met otherwise, and develop my independence skills. The classes I took in Prague had nothing to do with my major, but they were especially perfect for the location I was in. The first class I took was PY123: Stellar and Galactic Astronomy. The Czech Republic is filled with observatories, which we got to visit as a class, so it was great to see telescopes and other astronomical instruments in person that we were learning about in class. The second class I took was SOC350: Food and Society, which taught us about the history of food and more about the food and culture of The Czech Republic specifically. I loved learning about Czech culture and food because it allowed me to understand the culture and people better and know what foods to try while traveling around the country. In this class, we also had a few days where we would cook Czech food. Because of these cooking classes, I tried interesting foods that I never would have thought of trying. Outside of classes, my newly made friends and I would discover all parts of the city and plan other trips to do on the weekends. This summer brought the exploration of an extensive number of places besides Prague such as Czesky Krumlov, Vienna, the south of France, Paris, and Italy. The experiences I had in Prague were so beneficial towards my self-growth. I will forever be grateful to NC State for offering this program.

After the adventure-filled summer in Prague, it was already time to go back to school, and I was a junior. After I enjoyed my time living in the quad during sophomore year, my roommate and I decided to live there for junior year as well. This year in the quad felt different as I had completed my honors forum requirements the year prior and most of my other friends moved out of the quad. However, I still enjoyed my time there as I got to make new friends and

continue to enjoy the beautiful environment. This year was also quite different from my first two years at NC State since I decided to get a job. I wanted to join a research project this school year, so I reached out to a couple of quantum computing professors at NC State, since this was a topic that intrigued me and I had never really learned anything about it. I wanted to find out if quantum computing were a topic I would be interested in for my future career. I ended up joining a project with Dr. Yuan Liu and the project he wanted me to join was one that he had not even started yet, so it was interesting to see the start of a research project. The project was about finding a new quantum algorithm for differential equations that would show quantum speed-up. At first, this project was extremely intimidating. I hardly knew anything about quantum computing, and it took a long time to understand certain concepts. Eventually I made progress and it was so encouraging hearing Dr. Liu's feedback saying he was impressed with how good I was doing on such a difficult project. I ended up collaborating with him for the entirety of junior year but stopped after a year. I ended up stopping because, no matter how exciting it was to work on the project, I found out that quantum computing was not for me. However, the experience I got from it was so beneficial for the rest of my life.

Besides undergraduate research, I was also still taking classes during junior year and one class I took was my second honors seminar. The seminar that I took was HON314: Society's Mirror - Literature in 20th Century America. I thoroughly enjoyed this class since it required reading multiple different texts from that period and discussing how that text mirrored the society in which that text was written. The discussions that came from this topic were always so interesting, packed with curiosity, and elicited even more questions about our society today. I wrote papers for this class and even one story where I got to practice creative writing. Junior year also brought even more Computer Science classes that I enjoyed and that really showed me what

I would want to do in my future career. I took a class CSC486: Computational Visual Narrative, which sparked my interest in video game design even more than ever before. This class required us to make four different video games in teams each with a different genre but with the same narrative. This brought challenges, such as choosing a narrative that fits within each type of game flawlessly. I initially produced the idea for our video games, which took place in a time-frozen techno city. I loved the concept, since I was the artist for the video games, and it sounded like it would be fun to draw. However, I did not realize how much work drawing all the backgrounds, assets, and characters for four video games within four months would be. Even though it was significant work and multiple all-nighters of drawing, it was worth it, because the video games turned out amazing and my professor was extremely impressed with them all. Seeing how much satisfaction and joy working on video games brought me is what helped me decide to focus on video game design for my future career. Therefore, junior year was an especially important year for the rest of my life, and it will be remembered forever.

Another event that made junior year memorable was my fall break trip to New York City with the UHP. The UHP is so amazing because every year they offer many trips, and one of the annual ones is New York City. I decided to go on that trip during junior year, and it was so fun. We got to see three Broadway shows, explored most of the city, ate numerous good foods, saw plenty of sites, met new people, visited two museums, and met a few Broadway actors. It was a trip to remember and the fact that UHP made it almost free for me was even more amazing. I felt like the most fortunate person when I was on this trip. With the fun classes, exciting trips, educational research project, and fulfillment of more honors requirements, junior year was one of the best years of my life.

After my summer in Prague, I was obsessed with studying abroad and I wanted to do it again. Therefore, I decided to sign up for another study abroad program for the summer after junior year. This time, I did not only want to study abroad, but I also wanted an internship to grow more professionally. I found the perfect program that allowed me to have an internship and take two classes in Ireland for ten weeks in the summer. I was so grateful to the UHP, who helped fund this trip. They paid for almost all of the trip if I gave them content from my trip for their social media. I would have never been able to go to Ireland without the UHP. I was quite nervous about this summer at first, because when I went to Prague, I went with my roommate, so I knew I would always have someone, but this summer I was going alone and I did not know anybody. However, I quickly overcame my fears when I noticed nobody knew anyone, so we all ended up being a large group of friends. The close-knit family feeling these people immediately gave made the summer so amazing. Besides that, the classes were immensely helpful as well. Both classes were based on engineering and professionalism, which benefited my internship and professional growth. In one of the classes, E497: Engineering Research Projects, I conducted research about the difference in artificial intelligence (AI) regulations in Europe and the US. I chose this topic because it was related to my internship and the company I was interning at was working on complying with AI regulatory requirements at the time, so I could interview them to help with my research. I enjoyed doing this research at the same time as my internship because it allowed me to learn more about a topic that will be useful in the future and it allowed me to get better at researching and interviewing. It also made my internship much more interesting because I was learning about the inner workings of a task that the company was working on and it helped the company understand the task better as well.

My internship in Ireland was one of the most amazing parts of the summer. I was placed

at a startup at University College Cork where they were working on an AI-driven palliative care product. I was able to help with code, testing, and creative projects. The creative project was my favorite since I was given the task of creating a short informative video about their product to be placed on their company's website. I made this video from scratch using my own art and stop-motion animations, and my boss loved it. This project really boosted my confidence in my abilities since I had no idea how my boss would find the video, but the fact that she loved it showed me that my creative intuitions are good. My internship also brought connections with people that made me feel so welcome and taught me such beneficial skills. Besides classes and the internship, there was also a good amount of traveling involved this summer, and every weekend was booked with unfamiliar places to explore. I traveled to places such as Dublin, Cork, Galway, Cobh, multiple castles and cliffs, Northern Ireland, Kinsale, and Killarney. Each place was so gorgeous and different from any place I had ever been. I loved getting to know Irish people, trying new foods, and being a part of the culture there for a summer. I will forever hold Ireland in my heart after this summer.

After my Irish summer, it was time for senior year. I could not believe I was already a senior. For my last year at NC State, I decided to move out of the honors quad because I wanted to experience something new. I moved into Wolf Ridge Apartments with three of my best friends and it was a great decision to do that for my last year as it has brought us even closer. I have not completed senior year yet, but my first semester was one to remember. I did numerous things with my friends outside of classes to make sure we did everything we wanted to before graduation. Besides all the fun things outside of school, I also took some of my favorite classes so far. One of those classes is CSC326: Software Engineering. This was an important class to take since it was a project-based course where each project required us to work in teams to

perform the entire software engineering lifecycle. This class was most similar to what a future career in Computer Science would look like, so it is good that I enjoyed this class. It was enjoyable because of my great team who were good at planning and fulfilling their tasks and the fun projects. One of the projects was called WolfCafe and we were required to code the backend and frontend of a website that would allow customers to place orders and staff to fulfill those orders. It was fun learning to design the website pages and the architecture of the software. Besides the heavy coding class, I also took an art class this semester called GC420: Visual Thinking. This class was mostly offered for Computer Science students because visual thinking is a particularly important skill for computer scientists to have. This class was so fun because we had to draw something new every week and each drawing helped us learn a new visual thinking technique. At the end of the semester, I created a large art project that explained one of the topics we learned about throughout the semester. I made a painting of which I am extremely proud. Another class I took this year is CSC461: Computer Graphics. After discovering during junior year that I wanted to go into video game design or something related, I decided to take computer graphics since that is a large part of the video game industry. I really enjoyed this class, and it taught me countless concepts I had never heard of and taught me to code in a new language. We had to code 5 projects which each helped me learn about different computer graphics algorithms and concepts. Project 5 is one that was particularly fun because we had to code a video game with the use of the concepts we learned throughout the semester. We all had to make the game Battlezone, which is an old arcade game. I enjoyed this class so much that I realized I wanted to dive deeper into computer graphics during my master's degree.

Senior year did not only consist of doing fun things with friends and classes, but I was also extremely busy applying for master's programs. I knew I wanted to go back to Europe to be

closer to my family, but at first, I did not know which specialization within Computer Science I would want. However, the computer graphics class I took immediately made this decision for me. I ended up applying for five different Computer Graphics programs in five different European countries, and in the next few months, it will be revealed which school I will go to. Starting my master's degree in a new country is an adventure for which I am so ready and excited. Even though I will be leaving my friends in the US, I am ready to go back home. I have one semester left at NC State and I am ready to make it the most memorable one yet.

So many of the experiences that I have had at NC State were because of four things: NC State's possibilities, education, and programs, the UHP, my curiosity about the world, and my eagerness to learn. Most of NC State's traveling adventures, cultural experiences, and educational classes I have had are because of the UHP's funding and opportunities. I am so grateful for how amazing the UHP has made my college experience, because without it, I would not have been able to do so many things that have shaped me into the person I am today. However, even though the UHP made my experiences possible, none of them would have happened if I did not genuinely want to have these experiences. One of my goals in life is to have as many experiences as possible and because of that goal, I seek adventure, which is what led me to finding the UHP and taking the opportunities that were offered to me. I am grateful that I am unafraid of new things because that could have stopped me from doing some of the most memorable things I have done in college so far. Besides my adventurous spirit, the fact that I am always eager to learn and want to make the most of each class I take also made my college experience phenomenal. I came to college to learn more about a topic I was interested in and to find out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, and because of my eagerness for those things, I did that exactly. Not only has college taught me so much about myself, but it has also

shown me what my goals in life are, which are incredibly important things to know at this time of my life. I have one semester left at NC State at the time that I am writing this. I am excited to see what the last semester will bring me. It is unbelievable that in five months I will have a Computer Science diploma in my hands. The amount of work that has gone into this degree will make holding that paper in my hands very meaningful and emotional. The end of my undergraduate experience is bittersweet, but I am excited for the new adventure that awaits.