

Original Research Article

Does the Medal Still Shine After Graduation? Social Expectations and Career Trajectory of Latin Honor Graduates

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Abstract: Latin honors have long been perceived as indicators of intelligence, competence, and future professional success. However, despite the prestige associated with academic distinction, limited studies have explored the lived experiences of Latin honor graduates after graduation, particularly regarding the social expectations and career realities they encounter. Existing literature has largely focused on employability, academic achievement, and workplace outcomes while giving insufficient attention to the emotional, psychological, and professional adjustments experienced by honor graduates during their transition into adulthood and professional life. This gap is significant because unrealistic societal expectations attached to academic excellence may contribute to pressure, identity struggles, career anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among graduates. Understanding these experiences is important in developing more holistic perspectives toward academic achievers and their post-graduation realities. This study explored the lived experiences of Latin honor graduates in relation to social expectations and career trajectories after graduation. Specifically, it examined how graduates perceived and negotiated expectations imposed by society, family, peers, and themselves, as well as how they navigated professional realities following academic distinction. The study employed a qualitative exploratory narrative design involving twenty-four (24) Latin honor graduates from various higher education institutions in the Philippines, selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. The findings revealed that Latin honors extended beyond academic recognition and evolved into socially constructed expectations that shaped participants' emotional well-being, career decisions, and professional identities. Participants experienced pressure to sustain excellence, fear of failure, career anxiety, workplace insecurity, and

disappointment when academic distinction did not guarantee professional success. The study further revealed that employability and career advancement were increasingly influenced by practical experience, adaptability, networking, and continuous self-development rather than academic credentials alone.

Keywords: Latin honor graduates, academic distinction, social expectations, career trajectories, workplace realities, professional adjustment, narrative inquiry

Introduction

Academic excellence has long been regarded as a symbol of competence, discipline, and future professional success. Across many educational institutions, Latin honors function not only as academic distinctions but also as social markers that signify intellectual superiority and high potential. Graduates who receive honors are often celebrated by their families, schools, and communities, creating an expectation that they will naturally excel in their professional lives. However, the transition from academic achievement to workplace realities has become increasingly complex in contemporary society, where employability and career success are no longer determined solely by scholastic performance. Studies have shown that professional advancement now depends on adaptability, networking, resilience, workplace exposure, and socio-emotional competencies rather than academic recognition alone (García-Chitiva & Correa, 2023; Achananuparp et al., 2025; Si & Marinoni, 2026).

International literature suggests that while graduating with honors may provide initial advantages in employment and salary opportunities, such distinctions do not necessarily guarantee long-term career stability and fulfillment. Atay and Tumen (2023) found that honors degrees positively influenced entry wages among economics graduates, particularly in non-elite universities, indicating that academic honors continue to function as labor-market signals. Nevertheless, Sun et al. (2023) argued that early academic distinction does not always translate into sustained professional mobility because systemic inequalities and social barriers continue to shape career progression. Similarly, Whalley et al. (2024) reported that many graduates struggled in adjusting from academic environments to professional workplaces despite strong educational preparation. These findings imply that academic prestige may offer temporary advantages while failing to fully prepare graduates for the multidimensional realities of professional life.

Other international studies further emphasized that career success extends beyond cognitive achievement. García-Chitiva and Correa (2023) highlighted the increasing importance of soft skills such as creativity, teamwork, adaptability, and leadership in professional settings. Likewise, Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (2023) revealed that networking, workplace adaptability, and professional experiences significantly

influenced graduates' long-term career trajectories more than academic credentials alone. Emmanuel and Dzisi (2024) additionally found that high-achieving graduates often experienced anxiety, pressure, and uncertainty when their employment outcomes failed to meet societal expectations. Nasser (2024) similarly noted that graduates frequently encountered emotional exhaustion and identity-related struggles while navigating career pathways after graduation. These studies collectively suggest that academic excellence may coexist with emotional burden, identity conflict, and social pressure during professional transition. Recent tracer and employability studies also reinforced the argument that academic preparation alone is insufficient in ensuring long-term professional sustainability. Flores (2025) found that nursing graduates' career pathways were shaped not only by educational achievement but also by self-efficacy, environmental opportunities, and professional adaptation. Similarly, Montuerto and Arevalo (2024) reported that many graduates experienced difficulties aligning academic preparation with workplace expectations, emphasizing the importance of practical competencies and adaptability in sustaining career growth. Demafeliz (2025) further observed that institutional reputation, digital competencies, and industry alignment significantly influenced graduates' employment outcomes and professional advancement. These findings suggest that career progression is increasingly influenced by contextual and experiential factors beyond scholastic distinction alone.

Several studies also examined the lived experiences of honor graduates in relation to employability and professional adjustment. Villanueva et al. (2025) revealed that academic honors, licensure examination performance, and postgraduate education positively influenced employment opportunities and career progression among Latin honor graduates. However, the same study emphasized that academic distinction alone could not ensure long-term career success. In another qualitative investigation, Rico-Villanueva et al. (2025) found that resilience, continuous learning, adaptability, and networking were essential in sustaining employability beyond graduation. These findings indicate that the experiences of honor graduates extend beyond recognition and involve continuous psychological and professional adjustment.

Within the Philippine context, related studies also demonstrated the changing realities surrounding academic honors and graduate employability. Giray (2024) argued that grade inflation in higher education may weaken the symbolic value and predictive capacity of Latin honors, potentially creating unrealistic expectations regarding competence and future success. Meanwhile, the qualitative study conducted on Latin awardees who shifted careers from teaching to the BPO industry revealed that career decisions were strongly influenced by financial realities, emotional fulfillment, workplace experiences, and identity transformation rather than academic preparation alone (Puson et al., 2024). Miranda et al. (2025) further observed that employers increasingly prioritize communication skills, adaptability, and critical thinking over academic distinctions in contemporary employment settings. These studies suggest that although Latin honors continue to carry prestige in

Philippine society, their practical significance in professional advancement may be gradually shifting. Additional studies likewise highlighted the evolving realities faced by graduates in contemporary labor markets. Cuasito and Sequera (2025) found that networking, workplace exposure, and adaptability played more substantial roles in career mobility than academic distinctions among technology graduates. In the same vein, Lumines (2025) revealed that many graduates struggled in transitioning from academic excellence to workplace realities despite possessing strong scholastic backgrounds.

Despite the growing body of literature on employability, career mobility, and academic achievement, existing studies appeared to focus predominantly on employment outcomes, wages, workplace competencies, and institutional preparation. Much of the literature emphasized the measurable effects of academic distinction on employability while giving limited attention to the social and psychological dimensions experienced by Latin honor graduates after graduation. Furthermore, although previous studies explored workplace adjustment and career trajectories, there remained limited qualitative investigations specifically examining how societal expectations, familial pressure, and the burden of maintaining an image of excellence shaped the lived experiences of Latin honor graduates. The emotional contradictions between public recognition and private career struggles also appeared underexplored within both international and Philippine literature.

In response to these gaps, the present study sought to explore the lived experiences of Latin honor graduates in relation to the social expectations attached to academic distinction and the realities of their career trajectories after graduation. Specifically, the study aimed to (1) examine how honor graduates perceived and negotiated the expectations imposed upon them by society, family, peers, and themselves, as well as (2) how these expectations influenced their professional experiences, identity formation, and career decisions. The study intended to contribute deeper insights into the psychosocial realities behind academic excellence and the evolving meaning of Latin honors in contemporary society.

This study was anchored on the theories of Symbolic Interactionism, Expectancy Theory, and Role Theory to explain the lived experiences of Latin honor graduates in navigating social expectations and career trajectories after graduation. Symbolic Interactionism, developed by Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969), posits that individuals construct meanings and identities through social interaction, suggesting that Latin honors function as symbolic representations of excellence that shape how graduates are perceived by society and how they perceive themselves. Expectancy Theory by Vroom (1964) further explains that individuals' motivations and behaviors are influenced by anticipated outcomes and rewards, implying that honor graduates may experience pressure to achieve exceptional career success because academic distinction is commonly associated with professional advancement and social mobility. Meanwhile, Role Theory explains that society assigns specific expectations and responsibilities to individuals based on their social status, which may compel Latin honor graduates to continuously embody competence, leadership, and

achievement even beyond academic settings (Van der Horst, 2016). Collectively, these theories provided a comprehensive lens in understanding how academic honors become socially constructed symbols that influence identity formation, societal expectations, personal pressure, and professional adjustment among Latin honor graduates.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory narrative research design to investigate the lived experiences of Latin honor graduates in relation to social expectations and career trajectories after graduation. Exploratory qualitative research is appropriate when examining underexplored phenomena that require a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives, meanings, and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, narrative inquiry enabled the researchers to gather detailed stories and personal accounts from participants regarding how academic distinction shaped their professional lives, identity formation, and perceived societal expectations. Narrative design is particularly suitable for studies focusing on life experiences and transitions because it allows participants to construct and reflect upon the meanings attached to their experiences over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Population and Sampling

The participants of the study consisted of twenty-four (24) college graduates who graduated with Latin honors from various higher education institutions in the Philippines. The study utilized purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to select participants who possess specific characteristics and experiences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). The participants were intentionally chosen because they could provide rich and meaningful insights regarding the social expectations and career trajectories associated with academic distinction. Purposive sampling is appropriate in narrative inquiry because it allows researchers to obtain in-depth information from individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015).

The study included participants who met the following criteria: (1) college graduates who graduated with Latin honors such as cum laude, magna cum laude, or summa cum laude; (2) graduates from higher education institutions located in the Philippines; (3) individuals who had already transitioned into employment, career exploration, unemployment, or professional adjustment after graduation; (4) graduates who were willing to voluntarily participate and share their lived experiences regarding social expectations and career trajectories; and (5) participants who were able to communicate their experiences clearly during the interview process. The inclusion criteria ensured that participants possessed direct and relevant experiences aligned with the objectives of the study. Meanwhile, the study excluded individuals who did not graduate with Latin honors,

graduates who were still currently enrolled in college programs, and participants who were unwilling to provide informed consent or complete the interview process.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in the study was a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide composed of open-ended questions focusing on participants' experiences, perceptions, challenges, and realizations as Latin honor graduates after graduation. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility in probing participants' responses while ensuring that the objectives of the study were adequately addressed. According to Kallio et al. (2016), semi-structured interviews are effective in qualitative studies because they facilitate detailed exploration of participants' experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews. The validity and reliability of the research instrument were established through expert validation and pilot testing to ensure the clarity, relevance, and consistency of the interview questions in addressing the objectives of the study.

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researchers sought approval from appropriate authorities and secured informed consent from all participants. Potential participants who met the inclusion criteria were identified and invited to participate in the study. Upon confirmation of participation, interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times and locations. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to openly narrate their experiences regarding the expectations associated with Latin honors and their career journeys after graduation. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in transcription and analysis. The researchers also observed confidentiality and allowed participants to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

Data Analysis

The gathered data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis to identify recurring meanings, experiences, and patterns related to social expectations and career trajectories among Latin honor graduates. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, carefully reviewed, coded, and categorized into emerging themes aligned with the objectives of the study. Braun and Clarke (2006) explained that thematic analysis is a flexible and systematic method used in qualitative research to identify, analyze, and interpret meaningful patterns within qualitative data.

Ethical Considerations

The study strictly adhered to ethical principles in conducting research involving human participants. Participants were informed regarding the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. To ensure privacy and protection, pseudonyms were used in place of participants' real names, and all collected information was treated with utmost confidentiality. The study also complied with the ethical principles outlined in the Data

Privacy Act of 2012, which mandates the protection of personal information and safeguards participants' privacy throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Objective 1: *To explore the social expectations experienced by Latin honor graduates after graduation.*

Research Question 1: *How do Latin honor graduates perceive and negotiate the expectations imposed upon them by society, family, peers, and themselves after graduation?*

Theme 1: *The Burden of Sustaining Excellence*

A dominant narrative that emerged from the participants centered on the overwhelming pressure to constantly embody success after earning Latin honors. Out of the 24 participants, 22 shared that their academic distinction created heightened expectations from family members, peers, and even themselves, making them feel obligated to maintain an image of excellence even after graduation. Several participants expressed that people around them assumed they would immediately secure stable employment, pursue prestigious careers, or achieve financial stability faster than others. While Latin honors initially brought pride and validation, many participants narrated that the recognition gradually evolved into emotional pressure, fear of failure, and anxiety over disappointing the people who believed in their "bright future." Some participants admitted that they avoided discussing their struggles publicly because they felt that honor graduates were not expected to experience uncertainty, unemployment, or career confusion. This illustrates how academic distinction extended beyond scholastic recognition and became a socially constructed identity associated with perfection and continuous achievement.

Honestly, after graduation, it felt like I was no longer allowed to fail. During college, it felt like such a huge achievement because everybody was proud—my family, my teachers, even relatives I barely knew suddenly started posting about me. – (Participant 21)

But after a few months, the feeling changed. Every gathering started to feel pressuring because people would ask, 'You're the magna cum laude, where are you working now?' or 'You should already have a high position.' Then, when you still do not have stable work, you begin to feel ashamed speaking up because you feel disappointing. It felt like people loved the medal more than the actual person behind it. - (Participant 7)

The participants' narratives resonate with the studies of Emmanuel and Dzisi (2024) and Nasser (2024), which explained that high-achieving graduates frequently experience pressure, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion when real-life career outcomes fail to align with societal expectations. Similarly, Villanueva et al. (2025) emphasized that academic distinction alone does not guarantee sustained professional success despite the prestige attached to honors. From a theoretical perspective, the experiences of the participants

strongly reflect Symbolic Interactionism, proposed by Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969), which suggests that individuals develop self-identity through social interactions and shared meanings. In this context, Latin honors became symbolic representations of competence and success, shaping how participants perceived themselves and how society treated them after graduation. Consequently, many participants appeared to internalize the belief that they must continuously prove their worth even beyond the academic environment. This circumstance highlights the need for educational institutions and families to recognize that academic achievers also encounter vulnerability, uncertainty, and emotional struggles during career transitions despite their accomplishments.

Theme 2: Fear of Failure After Graduation

Another recurring experience shared by 21 out of the 24 participants was the fear of failing after graduation due to the expectations attached to their academic distinction. Many participants expressed that earning Latin honors created an internal pressure to always succeed, making ordinary setbacks feel heavier and more personal. Some narrated that they became overly cautious in making career decisions because they feared disappointing the people who viewed them as “successful” individuals. Others admitted feeling anxious whenever they experienced delays in employment, career uncertainty, or professional mistakes because they believed that honor graduates were expected to excel continuously even outside academic settings. Instead of viewing failure as part of growth, several participants perceived it as something shameful that could damage the reputation associated with their achievements.

“It felt difficult to make mistakes when you are an honor graduate because people automatically expect you to always know what you are doing. When I was not accepted in the first few jobs I applied for, I experienced intense self-doubt because I immediately felt like a failure even though rejection is actually normal. (Participant 11)”

“There was a time when I avoided posting online or meeting other people because I was embarrassed to admit that my career was still unstable. I felt that when you graduate with Latin honors, you are not allowed to fall behind.” (Participant 4)”

The narratives of the participants closely reflect Vroom’s Expectancy Theory (1964), which explains that individuals become highly motivated and pressured when strong expectations are attached to desired outcomes and success. In the context of the study, the participants appeared to internalize the belief that academic excellence should naturally lead to professional achievement, causing fear and anxiety whenever reality did not immediately align with these expectations. This situation suggests that Latin honors may unintentionally create unrealistic standards that make graduates more emotionally vulnerable to perceived failure and career uncertainty after graduation.

Theme 3: Experiencing Anxiety Over Career Progress

Career-related anxiety also emerged as a common experience among 18 out of the 24 participants, particularly when they began comparing their professional progress with the expectations attached to being Latin honor graduates. Several participants shared that they constantly worried about whether they were progressing “fast enough” in life, especially when they saw batchmates securing stable jobs, promotions, or achievements online. Others disclosed that they pressured themselves to immediately establish successful careers because they believed academic distinction should naturally translate into professional advancement. As a result, periods of unemployment, career delays, and uncertainty often triggered feelings of frustration, insecurity, and emotional exhaustion among the participants.

“It honestly feels pressuring, especially when you see on social media that everyone seems to be doing well in their careers while you are still figuring your life out. Sometimes I wonder if my achievements in college are still enough because it feels like everything resets after graduation.”

(Participant 9)

“I thought graduating with honors would make things easier, but it was not like that. There were moments when I questioned myself because it took me a long time to adjust to the work environment compared to what other people expected from me.” (Participant 15)

The participants’ experiences may be understood through Role Theory by Van der Horst (2016), which explains that society assigns expectations and responsibilities to individuals based on their social positions and identities. As Latin honor graduates were socially perceived as high achievers, many participants appeared to feel obligated to demonstrate continuous progress and success in their careers. Consequently, delays and uncertainties in professional growth became sources of anxiety because they conflicted with the socially constructed image associated with academic excellence.

Theme 4: Concealing Struggles Behind Academic Achievement

Another pattern observed among 16 out of the 24 participants was the tendency to hide personal and professional struggles in order to maintain the image associated with being a Latin honor graduate. Several participants admitted that they avoided discussing unemployment, emotional exhaustion, financial difficulties, and career confusion because they feared being judged by others. Some shared that people often assumed they were doing well simply because of their academic distinction, making it difficult for them to openly express vulnerability. Instead of seeking support, many participants chose to remain silent and present themselves as “okay” despite experiencing pressure and uncertainty internally.

“I really do not share my struggles with other people because it feels embarrassing to admit that you are still lost even if you are an honor graduate. Sometimes I just make it appear online that everything is okay even though I am already mentally exhausted.” (Participant 6)

“People always assumed that my life immediately became stable after graduation, so I eventually learned to hide my problems regarding work or career. I also did not want to hear comments like, ‘And yet you were an honor student.’” (Participant 20)

The experiences narrated by the participants align with Mead’s Symbolic Interactionism (1934), which explains that individuals shape their behavior and self-perception based on social interaction and societal meanings. In the context of the study, Latin honors became symbolic representations of competence and success, causing participants to regulate their emotions and conceal their struggles to preserve the socially valued identity attached to academic excellence. This suggests that the prestige associated with honors may unintentionally discourage graduates from openly acknowledging vulnerability and personal difficulties after graduation.

Theme 5: Career Choices Influenced by Practical Needs

For 15 out of the 24 participants, career decisions after graduation were heavily influenced by financial responsibilities, family expectations, and the need for immediate stability rather than personal passion or long-term aspirations. Several participants revealed that being a Latin honor graduate created assumptions that they would quickly secure financially rewarding careers and eventually support their families. Because of this, many felt pressured to prioritize practicality when choosing jobs, even if these careers did not fully align with their interests or original goals. Some participants accepted employment opportunities primarily because they offered immediate income, while others set aside personal ambitions in order to meet familial obligations and societal expectations associated with academic achievement.

“To be honest, I was not able to immediately pursue my dream career because I needed to help my family financially. Since I was an honor graduate, people expected that I could immediately provide after graduation, so I chose a stable job first instead of my passion.”
(Participant 5)

“There were times when I wanted to take risks or explore other opportunities, but I also thought about my family’s expectations. It felt like I was not allowed to make mistakes or start small because people expected more from me after graduating with honors.” (Participant 14)

The experiences of the participants reflect Vroom’s Expectancy Theory (1964), which explains that individuals’ decisions and behaviors are influenced by anticipated

outcomes and external expectations. In the context of the study, the participants appeared to make career choices not solely based on personal fulfillment but also on the perceived obligation to satisfy the expectations attached to their academic distinction. This suggests that Latin honors may shape not only how graduates are viewed socially but also how they negotiate career decisions in response to financial pressures, family responsibilities, and societal standards of success.

Theme 6: Experiencing Workplace Insecurity Despite Academic Achievement

Despite graduating with Latin honors, 13 out of the 24 participants admitted experiencing insecurity and self-doubt upon entering professional environments. Many participants shared that academic excellence did not automatically make them feel competent in workplace settings, especially when confronted with unfamiliar tasks, competitive colleagues, and real-world expectations. Some expressed feeling intimidated by coworkers who possessed more experience and practical skills despite having lower academic distinctions. Others narrated that they constantly pressured themselves to perform exceptionally because they feared that mistakes would contradict the image associated with being an honor graduate. As a result, several participants experienced anxiety, overthinking, and fear of being perceived as incapable in their workplaces.

“I used to think that being an honor student would be enough to make me confident at work, but when I entered the actual workplace, I realized it was completely different. There were times when I felt behind compared to others even though I had high grades before.” (Participant 8)

“It becomes more pressuring when people know that you are a Latin honor graduate because you feel like your work always has to be perfect. When you make mistakes, the judgment toward yourself feels heavier.”
(Participant 19)

The participants’ experiences may be explained through Role Theory by Van der Horst (2016), which suggests that society assigns expectations and standards based on social roles and identities. As Latin honor graduates were socially perceived as highly competent individuals, many participants appeared to internalize the expectation that they should consistently perform exceptionally in professional settings. Consequently, workplace mistakes and adjustment difficulties became sources of insecurity because they conflicted with the socially constructed role attached to academic distinction.

Theme 7: Realizing That Academic Honors Do Not Guarantee Success

A significant realization expressed by 12 out of the 24 participants was that academic honors did not automatically guarantee career success, stability, or professional fulfillment after graduation. Many participants entered adulthood believing that graduating with Latin honors would provide smoother career opportunities and immediate advancement. However, their experiences with job rejections, competitive hiring processes,

workplace adjustment, and career uncertainty challenged these expectations. Several participants admitted feeling disappointed when they realized that employers often valued experience, communication skills, adaptability, and connections as much as, or even more than, academic achievements. This realization gradually shifted their perspective regarding the actual role of academic distinction in long-term career success.

“...before graduation, I honestly thought that Latin honors would be a huge advantage in finding work. But when I started applying for jobs, I realized that grades alone were not enough. Some companies looked more at experience, communication skills, or confidence.” (Participant 2)

“I felt disappointed at first because growing up, people made it seem like once you become an honor graduate, success would immediately follow. But when you enter the real world, you realize that everyone basically starts over again.” (Participant 21)

The narratives of the participants resonate with the study of Villanueva et al. (2025), which emphasized that academic distinction alone does not ensure long-term professional success. The participants' experiences may also be explained through Symbolic Interactionism by Mead (1934), which suggests that meanings attached to social symbols are shaped and reshaped through lived interaction and experience. In the context of the study, Latin honors initially symbolized certainty, prestige, and professional advantage for many participants. However, exposure to workplace realities and career struggles gradually transformed their understanding of success beyond academic recognition alone.

Objective 2: *To examine how Latin honor graduates navigate their career trajectories and professional realities following academic distinction.*

Research Question 2: *How do Latin honor graduates navigate their career trajectories and professional realities following academic distinction?*

Theme 1: Adjusting to the Demands of the Workplace

The transition from academic life to professional environments emerged as a major challenge among 21 out of the 24 participants. Many participants shared that despite graduating with Latin honors, they experienced difficulty adjusting to workplace culture, professional expectations, and the realities of employment. Several admitted that they initially believed academic excellence would fully prepare them for professional settings, only to realize that workplace dynamics required different skills such as communication, adaptability, emotional regulation, and interpersonal competence. Some participants also narrated experiencing “transition shock” when they encountered workloads, office politics, and performance expectations that differed significantly from their experiences in school. These experiences made several participants recognize that success in the workplace involved more than intellectual ability and academic achievement.

“When I was still a student, I thought that being hardworking and having high grades were enough to become successful at work. But when I entered the workplace, I honestly experienced culture shock because I realized that skills alone were not enough. You also need to know how to work with people, adapt, and handle pressure.” (Participant 10)

“I realized that the professional world is very different from school. In college, there was structure and clear goals, but at work, you are sometimes expected to immediately adjust even when everything already feels overwhelming.” (Participant 22)

The experiences narrated by the participants parallel the findings of Whalley et al. (2024), who emphasized that many graduates struggle during the transition from university to professional employment despite academic preparedness. Similarly, Montuerto and Arevalo (2024) noted that graduates frequently encounter difficulties aligning academic preparation with workplace realities, highlighting the importance of adaptability and practical competencies in sustaining career growth. These accounts may further be explained through Role Theory by Van der Horst (2016), which posits that individuals entering new social roles often experience adjustment challenges due to changing expectations and responsibilities. In the context of the study, the participants had to transition from being academically recognized students to professionals navigating unfamiliar workplace demands, expectations, and social environments.

Theme 2: Entering Careers Outside Their Academic Field

Another experience shared by 19 out of the 24 participants involved entering careers that were unrelated to their college degrees and academic specializations. Several participants disclosed that despite graduating with Latin honors, limited job opportunities, financial responsibilities, and the need for immediate income influenced them to pursue careers outside their academic field. Some participants initially viewed these career shifts as disappointing because they believed their academic achievements would naturally lead them toward professions aligned with their specialization. However, others eventually recognized that career paths after graduation are often shaped by practicality, economic realities, and available opportunities rather than academic distinction alone. These experiences revealed how professional trajectories may become non-linear despite strong educational backgrounds.

“I honestly did not expect that I would end up working in a job far from my course. Before, I thought that since I was an honor graduate, I would automatically enter the field I wanted. But reality hit me hard because I needed to prioritize stable income over my ideal career path.”
(Participant 16)

“At first, it felt like a failure for me because I thought the years I spent studying my course were wasted. But eventually, I realized that success is

not always linear and sometimes you really need to adjust based on your situation.” (Participant 1)

The stories of the participants align with the study of Exploring Career Choices of Latin Awardees (2024), which revealed that career decisions among honor graduates are often influenced by financial realities, emotional fulfillment, and workplace experiences rather than academic preparation alone. Similarly, Flores (2025) emphasized that career pathways are shaped not only by educational achievement but also by environmental opportunities and professional adaptation. These experiences may also be understood through Vroom’s Expectancy Theory (1964), which explains that individuals make decisions based on anticipated outcomes and practical rewards. In the context of the study, many participants appeared to prioritize financial stability and employment security over academic specialization in order to respond to personal and familial expectations after graduation.

Theme 3: Pursuing Continuous Learning to Remain Competitive

For 18 out of the 24 participants, academic distinction alone was perceived as insufficient in sustaining career growth and professional competitiveness after graduation. As a result, many participants expressed the need to pursue graduate studies, certifications, training programs, and additional skills development in order to remain competitive in the labor market. Several participants admitted that they initially believed Latin honors would already provide long-term professional advantage; however, workplace experiences and competitive employment environments made them realize that continuous self-improvement was necessary to keep up with industry demands and outperform other applicants. Some participants also shared that they felt pressured to continuously achieve because people expected honor graduates to maintain excellence even beyond college.

“...after graduation, I realized that the medal alone was not enough. There are so many capable people outside school, so I really felt pushed to take certifications and attend trainings just so I would not fall behind.” (Participant 13)

“It feels like there is pressure to always have a new achievement when you are an honor graduate. That is why even though I am already working, I still think about pursuing a master’s degree or earning additional credentials because I feel like I still need to prove myself.” (Participant 24)

The participants’ narratives resonate with the study of Rico-Villanueva et al. (2025), which emphasized that continuous learning, adaptability, and professional development significantly contribute to long-term employability among Latin honor graduates. Similarly, Demafeliz (2025) highlighted that career advancement is increasingly influenced by additional competencies, industry alignment, and professional development rather than academic credentials alone. These experiences may be understood through Expectancy Theory by Vroom (1964), which explains that individuals are motivated to exert greater

effort when they believe it increases their chances of achieving desired outcomes and recognition. In the context of the study, many participants appeared to pursue continuous learning not only for personal growth but also to sustain competitiveness and preserve the expectations attached to their academic distinction.

Theme 4: Experience over Academic Recognition

A common realization among 14 out of the 24 participants was that workplace experience and practical skills often carried greater value in professional environments than academic recognition alone. Many participants shared that while Latin honors initially gained attention during applications and interviews, employers eventually prioritized adaptability, communication skills, technical competence, and actual work performance. Several participants admitted feeling surprised when they encountered coworkers with average academic backgrounds but stronger practical exposure and workplace confidence. Through these experiences, participants gradually understood that professional growth depended not only on grades and achievements but also on continuous exposure, practical learning, and real-world experience.

“When I was a fresh graduate, I really carried the confidence of being an honor graduate. But as time went on in the workplace, I realized that actual experience and how you handle people and pressure matter more than your grades in college.” (Participant 17)

“I had coworkers who were not honor students before but were extremely competent professionally. That was when I realized that having high grades in the past does not automatically make you better than others.”
(Participant 23)

The participants’ narratives parallel the study of García-Chitiva and Correa (2023), which emphasized that employability and professional success are increasingly shaped by socio-emotional competencies, adaptability, and practical skills rather than academic achievement alone. Similarly, Miranda et al. (2025) found that employers often prioritize communication skills, critical thinking, and workplace competence over academic distinctions in contemporary employment settings. These experiences may also be explained through Symbolic Interactionism by Mead (1934), which suggests that meanings attached to symbols evolve through lived interaction and social experience. In the context of the study, the participants gradually reconstructed their understanding of success as they realized that workplace credibility is earned more through practical performance and professional experience than through academic recognition alone.

Theme 5: Encountering Rejection Despite Academic Achievement

Experiences of rejection and discouragement were commonly shared by 15 out of the 24 participants, particularly during their attempts to secure employment after graduation. Many participants admitted that they initially believed graduating with Latin

honors would provide them with smoother opportunities in the job market. However, repeated job application rejections, unsuccessful interviews, and delayed responses from employers challenged these expectations. Several participants described feeling confused and discouraged whenever their academic achievements did not translate into immediate employment opportunities. Some even questioned their competence and worth after experiencing repeated rejection despite years of academic excellence and sacrifice.

“It honestly felt discouraging because before graduation, you think that your honors will automatically become an advantage. But when I experienced consecutive rejection emails, I really started questioning whether my achievements were still enough.” (Participant 18)

“There was a point when I was very confident before interviews because of my academic background, but eventually I realized that Latin honors are not guarantees. It was also difficult to accept that sometimes even when you are qualified, you still will not be chosen.” (Participant 9)

The participants' experiences parallel the findings of Atay and Tumen (2023), who emphasized that while academic honors may provide initial advantages, they do not always ensure sustained employment opportunities and career success. Similarly, Lumines (2025) noted that many graduates struggle with transitioning into the labor market despite possessing strong academic credentials. These experiences may also be explained through Expectancy Theory by Vroom (1964), which suggests that individuals develop expectations regarding rewards and outcomes based on their efforts and achievements. In the context of the study, many participants expected academic distinction to result in smoother employment opportunities; however, repeated experiences of rejection disrupted these expectations and contributed to feelings of discouragement and self-doubt.

Theme 6: Recognizing the Value of Professional Network

Another realization shared by 13 out of the 24 participants was the importance of professional relationships, networking, and referrals in navigating career opportunities after graduation. Several participants admitted that they initially believed academic excellence alone would be enough to secure employment and career advancement. However, their experiences in the workplace gradually revealed that connections, mentorship, and professional networks also played significant roles in accessing opportunities and building careers. Some participants observed that individuals with strong networks often gained faster access to job openings, recommendations, and career guidance regardless of academic standing. This realization encouraged many participants to become more open to building professional relationships and expanding their networks beyond academic environments.

“During college, I was really focused on grades because I thought that was all I needed to become successful. But after graduation, I realized that connections and referrals also matter a lot in finding opportunities.”

(Participant 3)

“There were times when people with connections or networks got hired faster than those with higher credentials. That was when I realized that knowing how to connect with people professionally is also important.”

(Participant 20)

The participants’ narratives support the study of the Institut Barcelona d’Estudis Internacionals (2023), which emphasized that networking and workplace relationships significantly influence career progression and employment opportunities beyond academic achievement alone. Similarly, Cuasito and Sequera (2025) highlighted that workplace exposure and professional connections contribute greatly to career mobility and advancement. These experiences may be explained through Symbolic Interactionism by Mead (1934), which suggests that social interactions and relationships shape opportunities, meanings, and individual experiences. In the context of the study, the participants gradually recognized that professional success is not solely built on academic distinction but also on meaningful interpersonal and professional connections developed throughout their careers.

CONCLUSION

The narratives of the participants revealed that Latin honors extended beyond academic recognition and evolved into socially constructed expectations that shaped graduates’ emotional well-being, career decisions, and professional identities after graduation. Although academic distinction initially provided validation, prestige, and confidence, the participants’ experiences demonstrated that it also carried invisible pressures associated with success, stability, and continuous achievement. The study further revealed that many Latin honor graduates entered post-graduation life believing that excellence in academics would naturally translate into smoother career pathways and professional advancement. However, exposure to workplace realities, rejection experiences, career uncertainty, and societal expectations gradually transformed their understanding of success. Consequently, the meaning of academic honors appeared to shift from being solely a symbol of achievement into a source of responsibility, self-pressure, and identity negotiation in adulthood. These circumstances suggest that the transition from academic life to professional life is not merely a professional adjustment but also an emotional and social process shaped by external expectations and evolving self-perceptions.

Moreover, the study implied that career success among Latin honor graduates is influenced by multiple realities beyond academic excellence, including adaptability, professional experience, emotional resilience, workplace competence, and interpersonal connections. The participants’ accounts demonstrated that achievement in school does not exempt individuals from insecurity, rejection, confusion, or career struggles after

graduation. Instead, their experiences highlighted the increasingly complex nature of professional success in contemporary society, where practical skills, networking, and continuous self-development often carry equal or greater value than scholastic distinction alone. Ultimately, the study underscored the need for educational institutions, families, and society to move beyond idealized perceptions of honor graduates and recognize them as individuals who also navigate uncertainty, vulnerability, and personal growth during their transition into professional life.

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