

BELONGING IN HONORS:
AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF MINORITY EXPERIENCES
IN A HIGH-ACHIEVING UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM

by

Jordan Zachary Boyd

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Curriculum and Instruction

Charlotte

2024

Approved by:

Dr. Greg Wiggan (Chair)

Dr. Lyndon Abrams

Dr. Marcia Watson Vandiver

Dr. Gloria Campbell-Whatley

ABSTRACT

JORDAN Z. BOYD. *Belonging in Honors: An In-Depth Exploration of Minority Experiences in a High-Achieving Undergraduate Program.*
(Under the direction of DR. GREG WIGGAN)

This dissertation explores notions of belonging among minority Honors students through student self-identifying questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. One objective of this study is to explore how the Honors educational environment impacts minority student populations and their overall sense of belonging. Another objective of this study is to examine the influence of race, class, gender, culture, and educational experiences prior to entering the Honors College. In the context of this study, a minority classification refers to the student's self-identification as one or more of the following groups: LatinX, Indigenous American, Black/African American, Pacific Islander, and/or Middle Eastern. The findings of this qualitative case study indicate that having a fostered identity before entering the Honors College, minority representation, community, and social/emotional safety are aspects of the Honors educational experience that contribute to the participants' notions of belonging. The study presents implications for diversity, equity, and inclusion in Honors programs, as well as institutional and systemic changes to help promote minority student success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first acknowledge my parents for all of your support throughout this process. I was extremely young, and struggling with a substantial share of imposter syndrome, when this doctoral process began. Nevertheless, both of you continuously poured into me in the most helpful of ways and for that I am forever grateful. Every opportunity to quit, I took. Every reason to leave the program and walk away from this life-changing experience, I found. Despite my best efforts to take the easy road, neither of you would accept mediocrity as an option. I now understand and can truly appreciate your unwillingness to entertain my efforts to run from my destiny. I cannot thank you enough.

To my sister, thank you for listening to me even when I'm sure you didn't want to. Thank you for challenging me to push beyond the expectations that I set for myself, and cling to the belief that more was always possible. To my brother, thank you for holding me accountable; consciously and unconsciously. Having you in my life has forced me to question the decisions that I make, and the justification for making them.

I would also like to thank my chair, Dr. Greg Wiggan, for your relentless support from the moment I entered the doctoral program. Much like my family, your belief in me was unwavering and will never be forgotten. I would also like to thank Drs. Lyndon Abrams, Marcia Watson Vandiver, and Gloria Campbell-Whatley for their time and support.

To Dr. Bettie Butler, I would not be in this position without you. As an undergraduate student, I was lost and needed guidance. You took me under your wing and introduced me to the world of curriculum, instruction, education, and servant leadership. From Turning Point Academy to local town hall meetings, your community involvement and commitment to the growth and development of all Title I stakeholders has inspired me to reach for the stars.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my immediate family; Dr. Sandra Simmons-Boyd, Reverend Jordan Boyd, Lori Boyd, and Andre Ford-Boyd. Mom, the earliest memories I have in this life are full of your love and support. The selflessness that you have shown to all of us is beyond words and will never go unnoticed. I cannot thank you enough for being the greatest mom that a son could ask for and I pray to one day afford the opportunity to truly convey just how much I appreciate your influence in my life. Dad, thank you for pushing me. Thank you for never allowing my own unwillingness to push through hardship to deter you from being the Dad, mentor, and coach that you knew I needed. Lori, thank you for being my best friend. You have been my closest ally since birth, and I often find myself wishing that everyone could experience the love of a caring sister the way that I have. Andre, thank you for being the little brother that I never had, but always wanted. You remind me daily that excuses are the tools of the incompetent. From the detention rooms of the Union County Public School system, to the halls of Yale University, your life story is the greatest book that has yet to be written. I thank God for you, little brother. This work belongs to all of us.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	ix
LIST OF FIGURES	x
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	3
Research Purpose	8
Research Questions	9
Significance of the Study	11
Definition of Terms	12
Delimitations	14
Summary	14
Organization of Chapter	14
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW	16
Introduction	16
Being a Minority in Honors	17
Race in Honors	19
Class in Honors	23
Culture in Honors	25
Chapter Summary	28
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY	30
Conceptual Frameworks	31
Critical Race Theory	31
Critical Race Structuralism	37
Research Design	39
Transcendental Phenomenology	43
Reflective Statement	45
Participants	46
Selection Criteria	46
Data Collection	49
Semi Structured Interviews	49
Data Analysis	50
Validity	50
Summary	51
Risks and Benefits of the Research	52

Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality.....	53
Limitations	53
Assumptions	53
Summary.....	54
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS	55
Participant Summaries.....	55
Introduction to Study Themes.....	59
Theme One: Fostered Identity Pre-College	60
Subtheme 1: Honors Environment as Students Fostered a Sense of Identity.....	61
Subtheme 2: Rigor of the Honors Curriculum.....	64
Theme Two: Representation in Honors	65
Theme Three: Community in Honors	69
Subtheme 1: Social Class as a Contributing Aspect to Notions of Belonging.....	69
Subtheme 2: Race as a Contributing Aspect to the Students' Sense of Belong	72
Subtheme 3: Gender as a Contributing Aspect to the Students' Sense of Belong.....	74
Theme Four: Social and Emotional Safety in Honors	76
Theme Five: Belonging in Honors	79
Chapter Summary	82
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES	84
5.1. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the Critical Race Structuralism (CRS).....	84
5.2. What Factors Influence Minority Students' Decision to Join the Honors Program?.....	86
5.2.1. Fostered Identity Pre-College	86
5.2.2. Representation in Honors.....	89
5.3. What Aspects of Being a Minority Contribute to Minority Students' Notions of Belonging in the Honors Program?.....	92
5.3.1. Community in Honors	92
5.3.2. Social and Emotional Safety in Honors	94
5.4. What Elements of the Honors Program, in Particular, Contribute to Minority Students' Sense of Belonging in Honors?.....	97
5.4.1. Belonging in Honors.....	97
5.6. Summary of Discussion	99
5.7. Implications of the Study.....	100
5.7.1. Implications for Honors Leadership	100
5.7.2. Implications for Honors Faculty	100
5.8. Limitations of the Study	101

5.9. Recommendations for the Future	102
5.10. Conclusion	104
REFERENCES.....	105
APPENDIX 1: REFLECTIVE STATEMENT	111
APPENDIX 2: STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION.....	113
APPENDIX 3: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE	117
APPENDIX 4: IRB APPROVAL.....	119

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Percent of Black students in Honors	5
Table 2: Percent of Hispanic students in Honors	6
Table 3: Percent of Pell-eligible students in Honors	7
Table 4: Summary of Participants	56

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Number of Manuscripts Published Addressing Honors and Diversity	22
Figure 2: Type of Diversity Identified in Manuscripts	23
Figure 3: The Five Key Tenets of Critical Race Structuralism	38
Figure 4: Study Themes	60

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades instructors of adult learners have been mindful of the effect of culture and identity on teaching and learning, acknowledging the biological, psychological, environmental, sociocultural, economic, and political factors that influence how adults learn (French, 2019). Additionally, while Honors educational programming across America has long stood as the pinnacle of academic excellence, scholarship, and merit in the field of undergraduate studies, its stakeholders have not always been perceptive of the importance of students' sense of belonging in Honors learning environments (Coleman et al., 2017; French, 2019; Pittman, 2004). Cognard-Black and Spisak (2019) argue that belonging is best defined as the human need to feel connected with and accepted by others. According to Coleman and Kotinek (2010), Honors stakeholders widely define a sense of belonging as an assurance of security and support by way of acceptance, inclusion, and affirmation of identity. As there are disproportionately low numbers of minorities across the Honors undergraduate landscape, the elements noted above act as key influencers on belonging among Honors students of color. According to Raisanen (2023), a sense of belonging and access to support services are significant factors in helping Honors students, especially students from backgrounds that are historically underrepresented in Honors, to persist through graduation (Raisanen, 2023, p. 348).

According to Scott et al. (2017), despite occupying over fifty percent of the nation's population of current undergraduate students, non-White/minority scholars make up only thirty percent of the nation's entire Honors population (Scott et al., 2017). Although Honors programming holds the potential to impact the trajectory of Honors students' lives in positive ways, there are various facets of contemporary Honors practice that disproportionately dismiss or ignore the plight of Honors students of color (Coleman, et al., 2017). Since the Honors education

demographic—referring to administrators, faculty, staff, and students—has traditionally been predominantly White, it is paramount that an examination of cultural responsiveness in Honors is conducted.

David M. Jones of the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire argues that such research would provide stakeholders of Honors education programs with the answer to this important question facing Honors institutions everywhere: “Are diverse student populations served equitably in these high-value settings?” (Coleman et al., 2017, p. 34). The term “value” at its root is alone indicative of the longstanding mass misperception of Honors communities to date. Rather than conceptualizing this space as one that is rigorous and simply not for the faint of heart, Honors, on the contrary, is widely regarded as an environment that is conducive to White maleness and elitism in quite disreputable capacities (French, 2019; Hilton & Jordan, 2021; Radasanu & Barker, 2021). Considering that educational environments are microcosms of the world in which they occupy, rather than exploring cultural responsiveness in all Honors programs across the country, this research will take place within the confines of a single undergraduate Honors environment and focus solely on the lived experiences of its scholars of color in hopes of better understanding the intersectionality of race, class, culture, and education in a given high-achieving collegiate learning environment.

With the ultimate aim—close in mind—of reimagining the connotation of value commonly associated with Honors undergraduate programming, the importance of this research is far more promising in its exposition of that which matters most in these Honors spaces: belonging.

This study seeks to investigate the following research questions:

1. What factors influence minority students’ decision to join the Honors Program?
2. What aspects of being a minority contribute to minority students' notions of belonging in the Honors Program?

3. What elements of the Honors Program, in particular, contribute to minority students' sense of belonging in Honors?

It is hypothesized that minority Honors students' perceptions of self and otherness directly connect to their experiences in the Honors educational space (Coleman et al., 2017). This study also hypothesizes that the presence of cultural responsiveness among faculty, staff, instructors, and fellow Honors scholars positively leads to social and academic achievement. This research intends to provide a deeper understanding of the plight of minority scholars in Honors and to encourage culturally relevant programming and awareness throughout Honors across America.

Statement of the Problem

Minimal research exists on notions of belonging among minority students in Honors undergraduate programs (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019). However, a plethora of data can be found on the ever-shifting landscape of Honors education along with its many curricular and co-curricular ebbs and flows. According to Scott et al. (2017), in the first half-century of the existence of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), honors education expanded by 400%, with specific waves of growth in the 1960s and 1980s, followed by increases in the 2000s in the number of programs transitioning to colleges at a time when overall growth in honors plateaued (NCES, 2017; Scott et al, 2017). Consequently, the rapid growth of Honors across America has been reflected in virtually all capacities besides the ones that directly affect minority students: cultural responsiveness and diversity. According to Ticknor et al. (2019), the justification for the portrait of Honors being a longstanding presentation of heteronormativity and eurocentricity can be found fairly easily in leadership throughout the field. Traditionally, Honors undergraduate programming has offered students opportunities to grow, learn, and develop in capacities not typically afforded to the average, general-population, college student. However, these programs (particularly those at predominantly White institutions) are

typically composed primarily of a White student population and widely chaired by White department heads; indiscriminate of gender (Braid & Quay, 2021).

While nearly half (48%) of Honors leadership are women, women Honors leaders are more concentrated at two-year institutions (73%) and less at four-year institutions (42%) (NCES, 2017). Additionally, approximately 90% of those running Honors academic units are White (NCES, 2017). This lack of representation is mirrored among Honors student populations as well. According to Cognard-Black and Spisak (2019), on average, Black students are only about half as likely to be found in a University Honors Program as they are to be found on a college campus. Additionally, Latinx [Hispanic] students were slightly better represented but were still 42 percent less likely to be in honors than they were to be on campus (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019). A recent study found that only about 30% of Honors students at American public research universities are students of color (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019). Tables 1, 2, and 3 below present the composition of Black and Hispanic Honors populations across America, respectively.

Table 1*Percent Black in Honors*

School ID	NCHC Member	Honors (%)	University (%)	IPEDS (%)	Honors vs. University ↓ ^a	Honors vs. State
School #6	No	3.6	3.5	4.2	1.02	.54
School #2	Yes	3.0	3.1	3.8	.98	.26
School #7	Yes	3.9	4.0	3.9	.97	.59
School #17	No	5.6	5.9	7.7	.96	.25
School #4	Yes	2.0	2.2	2.9	.93	.31
School #10	No	1.6	1.9	2.3	.83	.24
School #16	No	3.6	4.5	4.5	.80	.27
School #5	Yes	1.7	2.4	2.7	.72	.26
School #15	Yes	3.2	4.8	5.6	.67	.23
School #3	Yes	5.1	8.5	8.4	.60	.33
School #1	No	2.4	4.5	8.6	.53	.14
School #8	No	0.9	1.8	3.2	.49	.13
School #13	No	1.9	3.9	5.3	.48	.21
School #9	No	1.3	2.8	3.0	.46	.20
School #11	Yes	1.2	2.7	3.8	.45	.20
School #12	No	1.9	4.5	5.0	.41	.11
School #14	Yes	0.0	1.7	2.8	.00	.00
Average		2.5	3.7	4.6	.67	.25

Note: IPEDS data are from fall 2017, the same academic year as the SERU survey. Data for percent black in the state used to determine Honors vs. State ratios are for 17-21 year olds from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2019).

These ratios are derived from percentages (not presented in tables) for a given group in the larger college-age population in the state (17–21 years old). These data were calculated by the U.S. Census Bureau (2017) in collaboration with the National Center for Education Statistics and were provided to the authors by Chronicle of Higher Education analyst Ruth Hammond (2019). These are the very same state-level data for underrepresented minorities used in the Chronicle article discussed above. As addressed by Cognard-Black and Spisak (2019), percentages of black students in the student body themselves do not at all represent the overall population in the state. Thus, the Honors-to-state ratios are always much smaller than the Honors-to-University ratios, a

fact consistent with the larger problem of underrepresentation found in the Chronicle of Higher Education analysis discussed earlier (Hammond, 2019).

Table 2

Percent Hispanic in Honors

School ID	NCHC Member	Honors (%)	University (%)	IPEDS (%)	Honors vs. University ↓ ^a	Honors vs. State
School #17	No	7.7	7.6	7.7	1.01	.68
School #4	Yes	24.9	27.9	29.4	.89	.50
School #15	Yes	3.2	3.7	4.1	.88	.32
School #13	No	4.1	4.8	4.7	.84	.53
School #6	No	23.1	27.6	27.5	.84	.47
School #10	No	28.7	34.6	33.7	.83	.58
School #7	Yes	37.1	45.1	45.7	.82	.75
School #11	Yes	7.0	8.6	8.7	.82	.87
School #2	Yes	4.7	6.4	6.3	.74	.53
School #5	Yes	23.1	32.5	32.0	.71	.46
School #12	No	5.0	7.1	6.8	.71	.70
School #8	No	17.4	26.3	23.0	.66	.35
School #1	No	2.8	4.4	5.2	.64	.39
School #9	No	18.6	33.9	32.2	.55	.38
School #16	No	13.6	25.6	25.5	.53	.29
School #14	Yes	6.9	13.7	15.2	.50	.35
School #3	Yes	7.9	15.8	15.3	.50	.33
Average		13.9	19.1	19.0	.73	.50

Note: IPEDS data are from fall 2017, the same academic year as the SERU survey. Data for percent black in the state used to determine Honors vs. State ratios are for 17-21 year olds from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2019).

According to Cognard-Black and Spisak (2021), the average ratio of Honors to university representation for all three tables indicates that limited income and minority students are underrepresented in honors by about 30 percent, but examination of the tables reveals considerable variation across honors programs in diversity and in the degree of proportional representation relative to the educational environment in which they find themselves.

Table 3*Percent Pell-Eligible in Honors*

School ID	NCHC Member	Honors (%)	University (%)	IPEDS (%)	Honors vs. University ↓ ^a
School #4	Yes	43.5	48.1	39.0	.91
School #6	No	34.5	40.8	34.0	.85
School #8	No	38.4	45.6	34.0	.84
School #10	No	38.9	46.4	39.0	.84
School #5	Yes	39.8	50.6	42.0	.79
School #7	Yes	47.3	61.6	56.0	.77
School #17	No	14.3	19.1	12.0	.75
School #11	Yes	19.7	26.8	19.0	.74
School #12	No	18.8	26.0	15.0	.72
School #15	Yes	15.8	22.3	16.0	.71
School #1	No	17.3	24.7	22.0	.70
School #9	No	31.2	44.5	36.0	.70
School #2	Yes	15.8	24.2	17.0	.65
School #16	No	18.6	29.0	24.0	.64
School #13	No	15.3	25.6	19.0	.60
School #14	Yes	19.2	32.8	25.0	.59
School #3	Yes	21.2	38.0	29.0	.56
Average		26.5	35.6	28.1	.73

Note: IPEDS data are from fall 2017, the same academic year as the SERU survey. Schools in the table are sorted by the ratio of honors to university percent Pell-eligible.

As with race and ethnic diversity, there is also considerable variation across honors programs in socioeconomic diversity, as measured by Federal Pell Grant eligibility. While Pell-eligible students are far underrepresented in honors at some schools, representation is much better at other schools, with the ratios of honors to university representation ranging from 0.56 up to a relatively impressive 0.91 (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2021).

Albeit noteworthy, such gaping holes in minority representation are consistent with patterns found throughout the landscape of American collegiate spaces in its entirety (Scott et al.,

2017). Therefore, stakeholders of Honors undergraduate education are left to consider the underlying issue: Are minority Honors students made to feel as though they belong in Honors undergraduate programs? This of course is a question best answered by direct stakeholder analysis, however, it is of the utmost importance to be mindful that the race/ethnicity of Honors leadership is not the issue at hand nor is it a direct reflection of students' notions of belonging. Cultural responsiveness in Honors, or lack thereof, is a far more fitting line of inquiry (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003).

The issue necessitating this research can be found not only in the gaps in research on the plight of minority Honors scholars but also in the void of data on the success or failure of said student population. According to Pittman (2004), although the disproportionate majority of minority Honors scholars have a documented history of academic achievement, there is a prevalent downward trend in grade point average, extracurricular commitment, and overall mental stability upon entering the Honors educational space in the US. A statistical pattern of this nature is alarming in many ways and should incite a desire to answer the following: what elements of Honors lead to this outcome for so many minority students?; what support is available to this student population?; is this true across all Honors communities? According to Cognard-Black and Spisak (2019), the general presumption of Honors students (indiscriminate of race) is that each is high-achieving, hardworking, resilient, diligent, and forthcoming. Though true on occasion, the silhouette of the contemporary Honors student is simply that: a faceless, nameless, colorless outline. Each scholar arrives with their own collection of educational and life experiences, all coupled with differing allotments of social and cultural capital that all coincide to heavily influence one's experience in an environment like Honors at a predominantly White undergraduate institution.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the lived experiences of Honors scholars of color at the intersection of race, class, culture, and education to best assess and subsequently define belonging in a contemporary Honors learning environment. Such an analysis will excavate the idiosyncrasies of cultural responsiveness in Honors programming, while also engaging the multifacetedness of otherness in a predominantly White and high-achieving undergraduate educational environment. In this study, the subjective accounts of various Honors scholars of color currently enrolled in an Honors program (which shall remain nameless) will be dissected through the lens of Critical Race Theory. The outcome of this research will aid in determining the existence of a relationship between race, class, culture, gender, and belonging in the Honors undergraduate learning environment.

Finally, this study aimed to contribute to current research on notions of belonging among minority Honors scholars by mechanizing a Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Structuralism Theoretical lens to better address the relationship between otherness, academic achievement, and belonging. The desired participants for this study are minority (LatinX, Indigenous American, Black/African American, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern) students currently enrolled in the Honors College, who are over the age of 18. Qualitative data will be collected from a minimum of four participants through semi-structured interviews. The outcomes of this study hope to present useful findings on notions of belonging among minority Honors students that may one day lead to a more culturally responsive learning environment in Honors programs that have previously fallen short of such a culture.

Research Questions

This study is guided by two theoretical frameworks that make up the proposed conceptual framework to help uncover the realities of otherness in Honors. The first theoretical framework that guides this study is Critical Race Theory (CRT). Critical Race Theory began as a body of

legal scholarship, whose majority was both existentially people of color and ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by law (Bell, p. 898, 1995). Critical Race Theory has since extended well into American education and is commonly mechanized as the arbiter of racial inequity inside the classroom and beyond. In the context of this research, CRT is applied to assess and analyze notions of belonging among minority Honors scholars at the intersection of race, class, culture, and education.

The second theoretical framework guiding this study is Critical Race Structuralism (CRS). According to Wiggan et al. (2022), CRS is a new contribution and sister framework to Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory and, through the role of science, attempts to expand analyses and mediating processes regarding the impact of racism in American classrooms. To challenge the master narrative and provide a framework for inclusion, CRS also provides a lens through which to view the history of humanity, which reveals that there is more variation within racial groups than there is across racial groups (Wiggan et al., 2020). Critical Race Structuralism is a theoretical framework that explains racial and ethnic relations in social and institutional systems in terms of patterns and relationships between race, culture, gender, and social structures (Alexander, 2012; Meyer, 2000).

This study seeks to determine the following:

1. What factors influence minority students' decision to join the Honors Program?
2. What aspects of being a minority contribute to minority students' notions of belonging in the Honors Program?
3. What elements of the Honors Program, in particular, contribute to minority students' sense of belonging in Honors?

Significance of the Study

Minority Honors scholars are entitled to a quality education that nurtures success in higher education and beyond (Longo & Falconer, 2003; National Collegiate Honors Council, 2002; NCHC, 2003). The importance of this study can be found in the absence of research on the experiences of minority students in Honors undergraduate programs. Honors programs are often criticized as havens for academically elite and privileged students; which in many contexts is true (Braid & Quay, 2021; Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019; Coleman et al., 2017). To assist in addressing cultural competence in Honors educational environments, this study presents an in-depth analysis of the experiences of six minority Honors scholars and how this social position has impacted one's notions of belonging in such a high-achieving and predominantly White collegiate space. Subsequently, a more programming-specific discussion of inclusive community building and social justice orientation is provided, and ideas for future research are suggested.

Honors programs in higher education vary in size, student makeup, and overall programming across institutions, but, as they continue to evolve, one area of growing concern has been recruiting and retaining students from diverse backgrounds (Longo & Falconer, 2003). Although inquiry into the enrollment of diverse students in higher education includes a significant body of research, less attention has been paid in the past to the types of academic programs as well as co-curricular opportunities to which students from minority backgrounds, lower socioeconomic status, and first-generation college students have access once they are admitted into higher education (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Braid & Quay, 2003; Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019; French, 2019). Given this lack of scholarly focus, many honors programs have failed to adequately address issues of enrollment and retention for diverse students or to realize the benefits of a culturally diverse honors population (Pittman, 2004). Addressing gaps in the enrollment and retention of honors students from diverse backgrounds is a necessary first step in

creating honors programs that are inclusive and fully engaging. Nearly twenty years ago, both Pittman (2004) and Bastedo and Gumport (2003) pointed out that little research had been conducted on the reason why there appeared to be such a disparity in the enrollment and active participation of minority students in honors programs (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Pittman, 2004). This research now exists and can be used to guide changes within honors programs to create more inclusive honors spaces.

Definition of Terms

Belonging: According to Cognard-Black and Spisak (2019), belonging is best defined as the human need to feel connected with and accepted by others. While this definition is generally adopted as the encompassing meaning of the word belonging, in the context of this study the term belonging has a multifaceted meaning. According to Coleman and Kotinek (2010), Honors stakeholders widely define a sense of belonging as an assurance of security and support by way of acceptance, inclusion, and confirmation of identity. As the disproportionate minority across the Honors undergraduate landscape, these four elements act as key influencers on belonging among Honors students of color. According to Raisanen (2023), a sense of belonging and access to support services are significant factors in helping Honors students, especially students from backgrounds that are historically underrepresented in honors, to persist through graduation (Raisanen, 2023, p. 348). According to Coleman et al. (2017), race, class, and culture are the primary identifiers that most influence an Honors student's sense of belonging.

Critical Race Structuralism: Critical Race Structuralism is a theoretical framework that explains racial and ethnic relations in social and institutional systems in terms of patterns and relationships between race, culture, gender, and social structures (Wiggan et al., 2020). It is a sister framework to Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory and, through a systems and institutional

analysis, attempts to expand analyses and mediating processes regarding the impact of racism in American classrooms.

Critical Race Theory: According to one of the concept's forefathers, Derrick Bell (1980), Critical Race Theory is a theoretical lens through which all issues pertaining to race in America can be analyzed.

Diversity: Diversity is described as the practice or quality of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations, etc. (NCHC, 2002; NCHC, 2003; NCHC, 2020).

Ethnicity: According to Radasanu and Barker (2021), the term ethnicity refers to a person's ethnic background based on the cultural attributes of their country of origin.

Honors Program: According to Coleman et al. (2017), an Honors Program is a course of study available to high-achieving undergraduate students while completing a traditional bachelor's degree.

Minority: This racial and ethnic classification—in an American social context—applies to all individuals who identify as LatinX, Indigenous American, Black/African American, Pacific Islander, or Middle Eastern (Longo & Falconer, 2003; Meyer, 2000).

Otherness: the quality, fact, or state of being different (Schutz, 1967).

Postsecondary Outcomes: According to Coleman et al. (2017), the phrase postsecondary outcomes refers to any outcomes related to participation in postsecondary education that include but are not limited to grade point average (GPA), two or four-year degree attainment, graduation, and certification.

Race: Race is a social construct and classification determined by physical traits and can be defined as the color of one's skin (Newman, 2016).

Social Capital: Social capital is established through relationships held and groups to which one belongs (Bourdieu, 1984).

Delimitations

The delimitations of this study are largely based on the setting in which its participants have been garnered. All minority Honors scholars will be selected from a single Honors College and have only been enrolled in said program upon entry into the undergraduate educational space. It is also important to denote that the researcher is a full-time employee of the Honors College in question.

Summary

This introductory chapter addressed the importance of belonging in Honors for minority Honors scholars in the U.S. The issue of overwhelming Whiteness in Honors was addressed in this study and described and supported with recent data. The research purpose, questions, and significance of the study were also provided. An examination of the plight of minority Honors scholars is of immeasurable importance for all stakeholders of Honors: admin, faculty, staff, parents, students, and the University itself. According to Longo and Falconer (2003), an increased sense of belonging contributes to students' growing ability to create intentional connections, help build trusting relationships, invite opinions and perspectives into one's orbit, and engage in purposeful storytelling. As such, this qualitative study will investigate high-achieving minority students' notions of belonging in the Honors program of a predominantly White institution.

Organization of Chapter

This dissertation adopts the format of the traditional dissertation that includes five chapters. The current chapter, Chapter 1, serves as the introductory chapter aimed at establishing

the problem and purpose and setting up the overall aims of the study. Chapter two includes a synthesis of the literature that addresses the historical implications of this study, other relevant studies related to this current research, and explanations of the theoretical frameworks by which this study was guided. Chapter 3 covers the methodology applied to address the specific research questions.

The rationale for designing this research as a qualitative phenomenological study is explained, as well as the data collection and analysis methods. Validity was also established in chapter three. Chapter four provides a comprehensive review of the findings. The dissertation concludes with chapter five, which includes a discussion and analysis of the findings as well as implications for future research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

According to Bastedo and Gumport (2003), Honors programs in higher education vary in size, student makeup, and overall programming across institutions, but, as they continue to evolve, one area of growing concern has been recruiting and retaining students from diverse backgrounds. This is a particularly alarming phenomenon considering the data presented in this text's introduction regarding the disproportionate number of minority students occupying the Honors educational space: though minority students have long represented over half of the current undergraduate landscape, only about thirty percent of this population can be found in Honors (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Braid & Quay, 2003; Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019; French, 2019). A systematic review, modeled by Denyer and Tranfield (2009), of the last twenty years (2000–2019) of scholarship on the recruitment and retention of diverse students in Honors can enable a better understanding of the varying facets of diversity, methodologies commonly used to study diversity, best practices for recruiting and retaining diverse students, and areas in need of further investigation.

Honors programs in colleges and universities are home to some of higher education's best-prepared, motivated, and engaged students (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019; Hilton & Jordan, 2021). Although inquiry into the enrollment of diverse students in higher education includes a significant body of research, less scrutiny has been paid in the past to the types of academic programs as well as co-curricular opportunities to which students from minority backgrounds, lower socioeconomic status, and first-generation college students have access once they are admitted into higher education (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; French, 2019). Given this lack of scholarly focus, many Honors programs have failed to adequately address issues of

enrollment and retention for diverse students or to realize the benefits of a culturally diverse and/or culturally responsive Honors population (Braid & Quay, 2021; Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019). Addressing gaps in the enrollment and retention of Honors students from diverse backgrounds is a necessary first step in creating Honors programs that are inclusive and fully engaging. Nearly twenty years ago, both Pittman (2004) and Bastedo and Gumport (2003) pointed out that little research had been conducted into why there appeared to be such a disparity in the enrollment and active participation of minority students in Honors programs (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Coleman et al., 2017; Pittman, 2004). This research now exists and can be used to guide changes within Honors programs to create more inclusive honors spaces. Three distinct facets of identity act as the quintessential ingredients of belonging in Honors: race, class, and culture (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019; Coleman & Kotinek, 2010; Coleman et al., 2017; Pittman, 2004). This review provides an examination of existing literature on the topic of belonging in Honors at the intersection of race, class, culture, and Honors education.

Being a Minority in Honors

One of the most impactful student-centered, ethnographic examinations of the relationship between diversity and the Honors undergraduate landscape was written by Singla et al. (2023) and is titled “*Diversity in Honors: Understanding Systemic Biases through Student Narratives.*” The authors of this text acknowledge that Honors has a history of enforcing superiority over a certain group or individual thus deepening the practices of discrimination in prestigious institutions that pride themselves on exclusivity (Singla et al., 2023, p. 57). Undergraduate Honors programs occasionally rely on these exclusionary tactics as a means of protecting the rarified and highly elite spaces that have long been accessible only to a select few

(Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2017; Singla et al., 2023). The authors of the Singla et al. (2023) text made a significant contribution to the Honors canon through the inclusion of student narratives. According to Hilton and Jordan (2021), the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* has only published manuscripts addressing the topics of race, class, culture, socioeconomic status, and belonging in double-digit figures three years out of the last twenty (Hilton & Jordan, 2021, p. 118). With such a lean composition of firsthand accounts on the true aesthetic of Honors from the perspective of minority scholars, Singla et al. (2023) present meaningful caveats throughout the overarching conversations taking place in the Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (i.e. study abroad/globally networked learning, undergraduate research, coursework, capstone courses, and graduation rates) (Coleman et al., 2017).

The authors of Singla et al. (2023) present a case analysis of UC Davis's University Honors Program (UHP). By focusing on twelve student narratives, they aimed to better understand factors driving a sense of belonging, inclusivity, and student satisfaction within the honors program (Singla et al., 2023, p. 59). With the ultimate goal of finding solutions to the lack of diversity retention of minority scholars, the researchers sought to engage collaboratively with faculty to conceptualize potential improvements to that which had been in place in the Honors College many years in advance. Improved academic support for students of color while increasing their retention, representation, and access to higher education were the crux of the Singla et al. (2023) motivations. Coincidentally, although this research was cloaked in the language of diversity, equity, and inclusion, these methodologists were inherently addressing students' notions of belonging in UC Davis' Honors College.

The four themes gathered from this research vary from programming to interpersonal conflict and communication. Of these findings, the reader can safely categorize these trends

along the spectrum of severity: (1) the Honors College contributes positively through faculty relationships, peer support, and the Residence Hall environment; (2) all minority participants have experienced some form of discrimination in the Honors environment; (3) experiences in Honors foster a disconnect within the program that results in the formation of an in-group versus out-group mentality; (4) the Honors College imposes a conforming attitude towards students' professional ambitions (Singla et al., 2023, p. 66-69). Such themes are important because they are a representation of that which the Honors environment is capable of; inside and outside of its academic spaces. Despite being synonymous with high scholastic achievement, one must take heed of the fact that Honors undergraduate spaces include living quarters, trips abroad, learning communities, seminars, and merit scholars programs that entail far more opportunities for microaggressions than any traditional undergraduate course of study (Braid & Quay, 2021; Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019; Hilton & Jordan, 2021; Ticknor et al., 2019).

Race in Honors

The Honors landscape has rarely (if ever) been regarded as the pinnacle of diversity and inclusion in higher education (Hilton & Jordan, 2021; Napolitano & Killinger, 2021). In truth, many of the practices applied across America's Honors programs at older and more prestigiously recognized institutions, engage in experiential practices that embody the antithesis of equity and inclusion. According to Coleman et al. (2017), Honors is a rather unique educational environment in its capacity for exposure, expansion, and expediency. While many Honors programs actively seek ways to diversify their Honors curricula and student population, the disproportionate majority of Honors cohorts across America are overwhelmingly White (Hilton & Jordan, 2021; Pittman, 2004).

Ticknor et al. (2020), conducted a qualitative study *Using Possible Selves and Intersectionality Theory to Understand Why Students of Color Opt Out of Honors* wherein the themes to emerge would be strikingly similar to those of the Hilton and Jordan (2021) research study. Ticknor et al. (2020), a group of Honors stakeholders and academics at Columbus State University, used focus group interviews with students of color who were academically eligible to enroll in honors education yet never participated (p. 67). The researchers combined focus group interviews with an analysis of recruiting practices (Ticknor et al., p. 67, 2020). Using a theoretical framework based on intersectionality and possible selves theory, the researchers found that their participants valued three particular things over all else: (1) diverse learning environments; (2) balance; and (3) co-curricular engagement that supported their professional, hoped-for selves. Coincidentally, Ticknor et al. (2020) did not arrive at a miraculous conclusion in the context of determining why students of color decide against Honors; they arrived at logical ones. Indiscriminate race–Honors students want to feel seen, at peace, and prepared for their future. The Honors canon fails to address this reality, with the exception of a minimal collection of submissions to the Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (Braid & Quay, 2021; Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019; Hilton & Jordan, 2021; Ticknor et al., 2019).

Considering the Ticknor et al. (2020) theme of “balance” emerging as a key value of potential Honors students of color, it is imperative that a reference be made to a 2002 submission to the JNCHC on the importance of balance. According to the Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (2002), the importance of balance in an educational environment like Honors has grown exponentially (JNCHC, 2002, p. 108). The cultural pendulum of Honors swings toward elitism, while the academy should almost inevitably provide a counterbalance in the interest of egalitarianism; if globalism displaces regional interests on the national agenda, then

the academy is likely to renew interest in smaller ethnological and ecological niches (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2002).

While volumes of some journals, *Honors in Practice* particularly, focus on the nuts-and-bolts issues commonly permeating Honors communities, innovative practices in individual Honors programs, and other Honors topics of concern to the membership, the canon is notoriously void of literature on diverse student and/or teacher populations. The seventh volume of *Honors in Practice* participates in a conversation on the various minority groups that currently occupy Honors at overwhelmingly low numbers, Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latinx students, who typically struggle with a particular form of isolation in Honors. One chapter titled “The Last Class: Critical Thinking, Reflection, Course Effectiveness, and Student Engagement” details the myriad of key priorities in Honors across America. Ironically enough, the needs of minority students are nowhere to be found on these pages. While published by the NCHC, this work will be exceedingly reliable and helpful in its direct interrogation of all that is wrong with Honors, without actually vocalizing any of these issues. This work was disseminated as a “solution to the problems in Honors”. However, one of the greatest ailments plaguing the community is the lack of diversity.

In Hilton and Jordan’s (2021) *The Recruitment and Retention of Diverse Students in Honors*, the authors expound upon the relationship between minorityship and isolation in Honors by way of the disparities in enrollment and retention. Roughly twenty years ago, both Pittman (2004) and Bastedo and Gumport (2003) asserted that little research had been conducted on the disparity in the enrollment and active participation of minority students in honors programs (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Pittman, 2004). Unfortunately, although the Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC) has sparingly addressed the growing presence of minority

students in Honors across America, an in-depth examination of the experiences of this student population has yet to take place. Figure 1 presents data on the number of manuscripts published addressing Honors and diversity. Though it is evident that the Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council experienced an influx of publications on diversity in the years 2010, 2017, 2018, and 2019, the remaining sixteen years displayed in the graph reflect a limited (and often nonexistent) collection of writings on the subject (Hilton & Jordan, 2021).

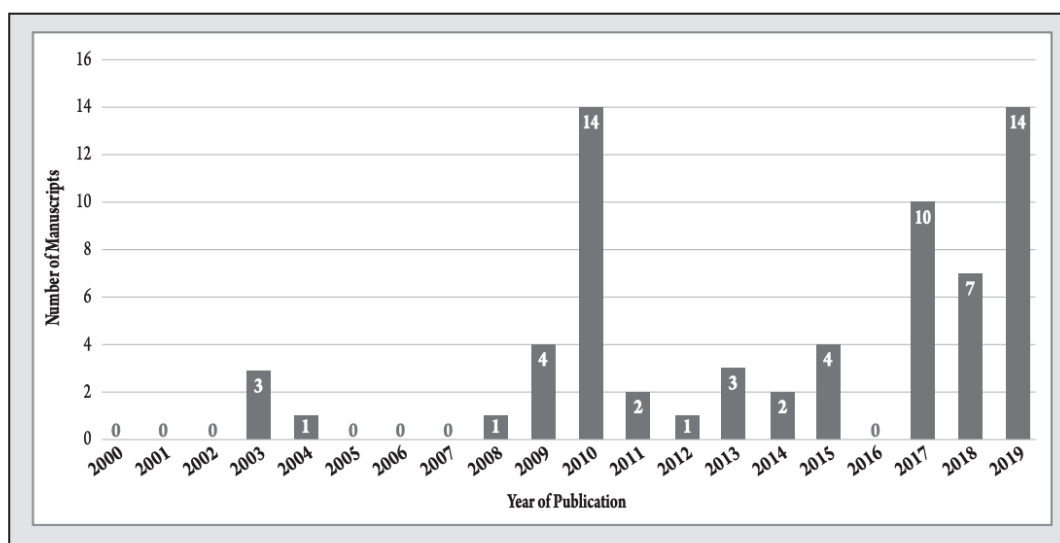


Figure 1: *Number of Manuscripts Published Addressing Honors and Diversity.*

Additionally, of the nineteen years that the JNCHC fielded this data, more specific information was gathered on the type of diversity found within the submissions. The four types of diversity most commonly found to be written about in the JNCHC through this timespan are race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender (Hilton & Jordan, 2021). All of these represent their own position in the cycle of social reproduction while simultaneously acting as their own idiosyncratic mechanisms of isolation for minority Honors students in these White spaces.

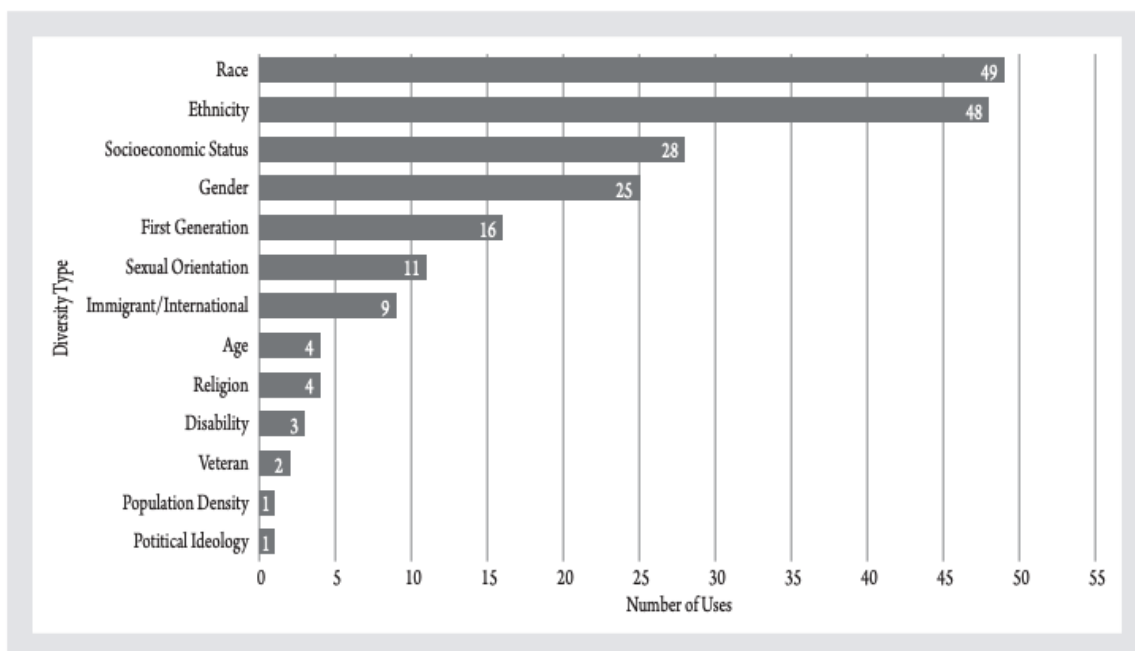


Figure 2: *Diversity Type Identified in Manuscript*

According to Hilton and Jordan (2021), six themes emerged from the close analysis of these submissions on the recruitment and retention of diverse students in Honors: (1) program-level improvements (including curriculum and co-curriculum); (2) inclusive community building; (3) course-level improvements; (4) holistic admissions; (5) recruitment practices; (6) and study abroad/cultural immersion experiences (Hilton & Jordan, 2021, p. 122).

Class in Honors

According to Mead (2018) in an article titled “Socioeconomic Equity in Honors Education”, many honors administrators can cite the numbers and percentages of students of color and statistics on the male-to-female ratio (Mead, 2018, p. 25). Public institutions might cite in-state to out-of-state comparisons and, for most, however, socioeconomic status is low on their list, if there at all, even though it is an important measure of diversity (Braid & Quay, 2021; Mead, 2018). First-generation college students, neither of whose parents have a baccalaureate degree, make up 58% of college enrollments (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Students with a Pell

Grant, which qualifies them as having a low-income background, compose 33% of the American higher education population (Baum et al., 2016). Approximately 24% of college students are both first-generation and low-income (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In Honors, first-generation college students make up 28.6% of Honors college and program enrollments and the disproportionate majority of this student population are minorities (National Collegiate Honors Council's Admissions, Retention, & Completion Survey, 2014-2015). The Honors undergraduate landscape is a labyrinth of categorical isolation and marginalization and social class is one element of a scholar's identity that must also be taken into account when determining belonging.

One essay writer on the topic of Honors and creative arts programming proclaims that Honors students like to know exactly what they're doing academically, far sooner than they would show concern for any anticipatory life lessons intertwined in a given lecture (NCHC, 2002, p. 49). Although this is a meaningful acknowledgment because it addresses the abnormally high levels of concern among Honors students for their academic performance, even in creative arts courses, it can also be interpreted as a direct reflection of the privileges afforded to many Honors students; the luxury of achievement as a propellant to success. According to Cognard-Black and Spisak (2019), this reality grows increasingly pressurized when socially positioned in the context of a high-achieving Honors student, who comes from humble beginnings and views his or her collegiate tenure as something far more valuable than a collection of new experiences. For Honors students with limited financial support outside of the University, academic achievement is a means of changing the trajectory of their family's legacy forever (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Braid & Quay, 2003; Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019; Coleman et al., 2017; French, 2019; Hilton & Jordan, 2021). This reality, however, is not explored as often nor as meticulously as it should be.

A supplementary text on the subject of “the professionalization of honors” engages the relationship between prestige and morality (NCHC, 2020). The key contributions to this work are essays written by members of the National Collegiate Honors Council (2020) on subjects permeating the Honors community like the plague. Merit, accreditation, scholarship, and rigor are four words that can accurately describe the spectrum of thought within these pages (NCHC, 2020). However, along with these pillars of Honors education soon follows inquiries on equity, equality, access, and diversity; four pillars found far less often in these educational spaces (French, 2019; Hilton & Jordan, 2021). In the mid-1900s, the proposal to establish a document titled “The Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” arose from a perceived vagueness about the meaning of Honors education (NCHC, 2020). Proponents of the document claimed that the goal of the text aimed to create clarity out of chaos in defining the profession of Honors while opponents feared the prospect of standardization (NCHC, 2002; NCHC, 2003; NCHC, 2020). The issue does not lie in the controversy itself, but in the debate’s complete dismissal of that which is truly corrupting Honors: homogeneity.

Culture in Honors

In Ballantine and Hammack’s text “The Sociology of Education”, there are five functions of education examined to connect the interdependence of parts in society (Ballantine & Hammack, 2016, p.29). According to Ballantine and Hammack (2016), the primary function of education is socialization; to become productive members of society through the passing on of culture (Ballantine & Hammack, 2016, p.29). Culture, a recurring theme in the cycle of perpetual capital according to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986), is the nucleus of functionality in productive education. Educators must then set high expectations for all students so that despite what they may have deduced from life’s expectations, the classroom will always represent an

atmosphere of high achievement. This reality persists in the context of Honors undergraduate programs as well. However, a disorienting element of tradition in Honors programming both consciously and unconsciously excludes the plights of students of color in a myriad of ways (Coleman et al., 2017). This process of exclusion is not only detrimental to the trajectories of Honors students of color, but it is also counterproductive in the initiative to build Honors as an institution into that which it is truly capable of being.

Braid and Quay (2021) are in favor of experiential learning for Honors students across America in hopes of better acquainting them with the world in which they occupy as young undergraduate students. City as Text (CAT), a relatively young yet fairly popular method of place familiarization, is a collection of practices used to encourage students to venture out into the cavities of unfamiliarity. However, although such an imposing effort has been set forth to expand the cultural understanding of Honors scholars in the context of language, history (domestic and abroad), art, and science, few charges have been declared in the direction of diversity, equity, and inclusion in Honors (Coleman et al., 2017; Longo & Falconer, 2003; Pittman, 2004). The crux of the Braid and Quay (2021) text, *Place, Self, Community: City as Text in the Twenty-First Century*, is an amalgamation of those tools along with justifications for each. In this bibliography, this source compares to the others in its specificity on community, rather than on the Honors College as an institution. The Honors community needed initiatives like City as Text, based solely on the perpetuation of Honors/University/Scholarship-centered thought processes (Braid & Quay, 2021). This work provides an in-depth examination of the approaches to revitalizing Honors, which is commonly translated as “diversifying Honors”. This source is immensely helpful in that it will present what efforts have been made, and, which is more, what efforts have not been made.

While the allure of Honors as an institution is rooted in academic and intellectual superiority, the community through which an Honors program offers undergraduate students has the potential to be life-changing (Hilton & Jordan, 2021; Radasanu & Barker, 2021). Renowned French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1986), introduced us all to the cycle of social reproduction, which insists that every human being on this Earth, at birth, was instantaneously assigned a relatively negotiable trajectory in life by way of social and cultural capital: ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals (Lemert, 2018). In abundant possession or lack thereof, of these facets of life one is fluidly directed over time and throughout life into one of two specific categories: the haves and the have-nots. A text that directly engages the application of such capital, *Occupy Honors Education*, adversely fails to denote the detrimental realities of a life vacuous of the aforementioned tools. According to Coleman et al. (2017), the point of the effort to “occupy honors” is to add depth and value to the conversation about diversity in Honors and provide a vision for the ways in which Honors can lead the effort to achieve inclusive excellence. This monograph compares to other sources in its commitment to diversity in Honors. This source has notoriously been coined “The Honors Bible” in the context of contemporary teaching methods in high-achieving undergraduate spaces, which is immeasurably helpful in my study in its direct alignment.

What Coleman et al. (2017) fail to address are the peculiarities of otherness in Honors. According to Charles Lemert (2018), Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital refers to the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, etc. (p. 13). Being that Honors is a predominantly White environment (roughly 70%), these facets of an individual's personality would be much more useful in application for minority Honors scholars if aligned with the Eurocentric; social interests typically

assigned to the contemporary White American. However, according to Coleman et al. (2017), minority Honors scholars may find it difficult to truly exemplify their culture in an environment with so few minority counterparts.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of the review of literature is to orient the current study with other relevant research. The literature review addressed the layers of otherness among minority Honors scholars to offer further context on current issues related to research on belonging in this high-achieving educational environment. Literature on race, class, and culture in Honors accentuates the importance of institutional support for this demographic. The literature also confirmed a significant void in the research on belonging in Honors, specifically among minority scholars. While existing research adequately highlights the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in Honors, more research on minority scholars' sense of belonging is imperative to truly raise the bar of cultural responsiveness in this learning and living environment.

A lack of diversity in undergraduate Honors programs is a critical problem that threatens to affect educational outcomes in the country. Though limited, existing research argues that honors programs in the country have failed to establish measures aimed at promoting enrollment and retention of diverse student populations and, thereby, failing to realize the benefits associated with a culturally diverse honors population (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003). As such, a need arises to examine this issue in depth and determine the underlying factors resulting in its prevalence in the United States. The importance of this research is to describe the lack of diversity in undergraduate honors programs occasioned by exclusionary practices and how interventional measures, such as establishing inclusive programs, could help address this issue.

The theories and the research method used for the study are discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to examine notions of belonging among minority Honors scholars in a contemporary Honors program. This study is significant due to the need to increase research on the plight of non-White scholars in a predominantly White educational environment. The topic addressed in this study is a small facet of a much larger issue that has permeated higher education since the *Brown v. Board* seminal Supreme Court decision. In the context of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the relationship between minority students in Honors is rarely addressed, with the Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council as a key exception (Coleman et al., 2017).

Research studies investigating diversity in Honors typically apply quantitative approaches to analyze individual student characteristics, such as grades, test scores, and financial need concerning belonging which fails to adequately address the complex nature of the phenomenon (Coleman et al., 2017; National Collegiate Honors Council, 2020; Pittman, 2004). For this reason, this study mechanized a qualitative approach that offers more substantive insight into the realities of otherness in a contemporary Honors program at a predominantly White undergraduate institution (Bastedo & Gumpert, 2003; Pittman, 2004). The following research questions guided this study:

1. What factors influence minority students' decision to join the Honors Program?
2. What aspects of being a minority contribute to minority students' notions of belonging in the Honors Program?
3. What elements of the Honors Program, in particular, contribute to minority students' sense of belonging in Honors?

The chapter begins with a brief overview of the theoretical frameworks that inform the research study. Next, the research design, which includes participant selection sampling

procedure, and data collection methods, is described. Data analysis strategy and validity follow. The chapter concludes with a summary of the covered methods and methodology.

Conceptual Frameworks

Critical Race Theory

The main theoretical lens through which this research will be approached, conducted, and assessed is Critical Race Theory (CRT). According to Derrick Bell (1995), at its inception, CRT was a body of legal scholarship, whose majority was both existentially people of color and ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by law (Bell, 1995, p. 898). Today, CRT's reach has extended well into American education and has in large part been divisively mechanized along the rungs of the sociopolitical spectrum, but is occasionally utilized in more resourceful capacities by many. This research study will benefit primarily from Bell's (1995) original goal of CRT in application as a hedge of fair and equitable protection for people of color in America.

In the mid-1970s, early CRT scholars, Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado grew immeasurably skeptical of what they described as 'colorblind ideologies', and the inability of scholars to truly understand the complexities of racism as systemic and multifaceted (Bell, 1995). By the late 1980s, these frustrations gradually fueled the subsequent rise of Critical Race Theory in popularity throughout various academic fields: urban planning, sociology, psychology, medicine, and education. According to Derrick Bell (1995), who is widely regarded as the patriarch of Critical Race Theory, the work of CRT is often disruptive because its commitment to anti-racism goes well beyond civil rights, integration, affirmative action, and other liberal measures (Bell, 1995, p. 899). Following the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954, the tumultuous relationship between minorities—specifically Black Americans—and the institution of the American school grew immeasurably conflict-ridden. Thus justifying the need for a

supportive framework throughout the fight for civil rights, which would soon after become Critical Race Theory.

A seminal article written by Bell (1995) titled “Who’s Afraid of Critical Race Theory?” ferociously challenges the common inclination to fight against CRT. In large part, the basis for the framework’s creation was in no way miraculous or unforeseen; in fact, CRT in all of its multidimensionality has maintained its presence in society and politics in the United States of America since the Jim Crow Era (Bell, 1995). In additional work by Bell (1980) titled “Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Issue”, he details a professional opinion contrary to that of Professor Herbert Weschler—American legal scholar and former director of the American Law Institute—who argues that Brown v. Board mindlessly traded the rights of White Americans to be separate from Blacks, in exchange for the rights of Black Americans to associate with Whites (Bell, 1980, p. 518). A conflict of interest is the specific manner in which Weschler categorized Brown v. Board. However, according to Bell (1980), the term “interest convergence” to which Professor Bell was referring posits that despite Weschler’s claims, Brown v. Board was not a conflict of interest but a convergence of said interest for a momentary period; Black Americans needed better educational environments and White Americans had such facilities.

Instances of such diverging pockets of educational capital can be traced back to the late 1800s and early 1900s by W.E.B. DuBois (1994/1903) in his monumental research study titled “The Philadelphia Negro”. This study is widely regarded as the first scholarly study on a non-White race conducted in the world. DuBois (1994/1903) canvassed, surveyed, and interviewed residents of the Seventh Ward district of Philadelphia to explore the daily social conditions of Black Americans in large cities. While the ultimate goal of “The Philadelphia Negro” was to create a roadmap of inequity, what DuBois (1994/1903) truly unveiled was a gaping disparity of

access. Such access acts as a staircase in a large metropolis like Philadelphia. However, educational inequalities are often overlooked based on the amount of attention commonly given to other pertinent issues. DuBois (1994/1903) determined that access is a luxury of Whiteness, and Whiteness is the key to access.

According to scholar and urban education intellectual Robin DiAngelo's (2018) text titled *White Fragility*, being perceived as White carries more than a mere racial classification; it is a social and institutional status and identity imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges that are denied to others (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 24). DiAngelo (2018) argues that the identities of those sitting at the tables of power in this country have remained remarkably similar: White, male, middle/upper-class, and able-bodied. CRT is a combing mechanism by which weaponized Whiteness, heteronormativity, and Eurocentricity are excavated. In the context of urban schooling, binary thinking commonly acts as a mediator for racism and other forms of bigotry. Later in DiAngelo (2018), the reader finds a section titled "The Good/Bad Binary" which declares that—prior to the civil rights movement—it was socially acceptable for White people to openly proclaim their belief in their racial superiority—until White Northerners saw the violence Black southerners endured during the civil rights protests, they were appalled. These White images became the archetypes of racists. At that moment, for the first time in American history, being of strong moral character and being complicit with racism became mutually exclusive.

According to Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) in the text titled *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Critical Race Theory gained momentum in the late 1980s as a means of protecting the rights of Black Americans from a social and political environment that does not always provide equity or equality (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In the Ladson-Billings (1994) text, the author deconstructs Critical Race Theory to a fibrous level in

order to better convey its purpose to the reader. One of the most important subelements of this process is the way Ladson-Billings (1994) details the tenets of CRT. CRT is broken down into six tenets that are used operationally to clean the lens through which race is viewed and understood in America. Ladson-Billings (1994) describes each of the six tenets of CRT in this way: (1) race is a social construct; (2) racism in the United States is a normal experience for most people of color; (3) legal advances (or setbacks) for people of color tend to serve the interests of dominant White groups; (4) minorities deal with being stereotyped often; (5) no individual can be identified only in one way; (6) people of color are uniquely qualified to speak on behalf of other members of their group (or groups) regarding the effects of racism (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 37). In this context, notions of belonging among minority Honors Scholars at the intersection of race, class, culture, and education in America are best suited to be broken down through a Critical Race Theoretical lens.

Since its inception, CRT has maintained a rather polarizing sociopolitical position that has only worsened over time. The primary issue fueling the polarization of CRT is language. According to Gina Castle-Bell (2017) in the text *Talking Black and White*, the key issue regarding the communication of race in this country involves the reality that most people do not know the difference between foundational terms used in this conversation (Bell, p. 17, 2017). Bell (2017) argues in the second chapter that many people often confuse racism, prejudice, and discrimination although they are not synonymous. Given the misinterpretation of these fundamental topics, it is not difficult to acknowledge that Critical Race Theory might be a bit of a quandary for the majority of Americans. While fragments of CRT can be found in the everyday language of all Americans—indiscriminate of race—, without a basic command of the vocabulary one would simply revert to a variation of xenophobia given their misunderstanding and fear of

that which is being misunderstood. The subsequent issues are the residual conflicts that emerge as a result of the primary misunderstanding of racial language. According to Bell (2017), talking about race and its related terms can create some sort of internal tension; especially considering the current language we use to discuss race relations in the U.S. is problematic (Bell, p. 17, 2017). There are six key terms that most commonly produce negative connotations and connect directly with a respective tenet of CRT thus justifying the demand for understanding: (1) stereotype; (2) categorization; (3) race; (4) prejudice; (5) racial prejudice; (6) power relations. Bell (2017) argues that through the process of defining each term, the subsequent issues stemming from the primary issue of ignorance will be made plain.

Term one, “stereotypes” are defined as overarching generalizations that align with tenet four of CRT: minorities are stereotyped often in America (Bell, p. 18, 2017). Term two, “categorization”, is the sorting of people, objects, and experiences, into contrasting groups which correlate with tenet six of CRT: people of color are uniquely qualified to speak on behalf of other members of their group (or groups) regarding the effects of racism; the categorization of race permits the agency to defend one another in the context of racial strife or misunderstanding (Bell, p. 19, 2017). Term three, “race”, is defined as a tool for social categorization and connects with tenet one of CRT: race is a social construct (Bell, p. 19, 2017). Term four, “prejudice”, refers to having a preference for or against individuals or members of a cultural group and adjoins with tenet five of CRT: no individual can be defined in only one way (Bell, p. 19, 2017). Term five, “racial prejudice”, occurs when someone has an affinity for or against particular racial groups and engages tenet two of CRT: racism in the United States is a normal experience for most people of color (Bell, p. 20, 2017). Term six, “power relations”, is defined as having control over someone’s body or the ability to cause them emotional distress. Term six compliments tenet

three of CRT perfectly: legal advances (or setbacks) for people of color tend to serve the interests of dominant White groups.

The most dejecting data supporting the issue of hyper-politicized education and widespread misinformation surrounding CRT can be found not only in the United States of America but also in the experiences of people of color who have immigrated to this country. *Education in a Strange Land* is a text written by Dr. Greg Wiggan (2012) that openly engages the malignancy of the contemporary American education system by probing the experiences of immigrant students rather than those born in the US. According to Wiggan (2012), as the world globalizes, social inequalities relating to global stratification are increasing the flow of emigration as the urge to escape poverty and deprivation leads many families to pursue the American dream. However, like many Latinx students, many African immigrants struggle with their social and economic survival, and they often feel socially displaced and are underemployed in the US (Wiggan, 2012, p. 80). Topics involving race in America demand an understanding of racial language that the average American struggles to comprehend. Adversely, the mirroring plight of immigrants of color should reflect the true extent of racial insensitivity and prejudice in the United States.

In reference to an anecdote about an immigrant student by the name of Malik, Wiggan (2012) addresses the invisible identity of “African-ness”: an issue that affects Black immigrant students disproportionately. The author continues by stating that teachers may assume that students of color are African American and may miss opportunities to integrate their unique African experiences into the classroom, and may misunderstand common academic challenges that these students might face (Wiggan, 2012, p. 82). The Institution of American education is perpetuated by eurocentricity and protected by Whiteness. The language, culture, and capital of

White Americans are the single most effective determinants of a student's success or failure in an American educational environment. CRT probes the inner workings of racial hatred in the United States, however, it cannot extend broadly enough to encapsulate the extent of such discrimination even to protect the immigrant student population (if they are students of color).

Critical Race Structuralism

A subsequent framework that will be applied to this research is Critical Race Structuralism (CRS). According to Wiggan, Teasdell, and Parsons (2022), CRS is a new contribution and sister framework to Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory and, through the role of science, attempts to expand analyses and mediating processes regarding the impact of racism in American classrooms (Alexander, 2012; Meyer, 2000). To challenge the master narrative and provide a framework for inclusion, CRS also provides a lens through which to view the history of humanity, which reveals that there is more variation within racial groups than there is across racial groups (Wiggan et al., 2020). Critical Race Structuralism is a theoretical framework that explains racial and ethnic relations in social and institutional systems in terms of patterns and relationships between race, culture, gender, and social structures (Wiggan et al., 2020). According to Wiggan et al. (2023), CRS is evidenced in education, districts, urban cities, and government. It is an important contribution to education research because it provides a social and institutional examination of structural racism, bias, and prejudice in these spaces.

Much like Critical Race Theory, CRS is fundamentally broken down into various tenets—five to be exact—which come together to create a supplemental device to be used in the exposition and decomposition of racial inequity in contemporary education. According to Wiggan, Teasdell, and Parsons (2022), the five tenets of Critical Race Structuralism are aligned to delineate C.A.U.S.E., which is the goal of CRS: (1) Critically analyze societal structure; (2)

Address dominant cultural indoctrination in education practices and policies; (3) Utilize social justice to advocate for equitable representation, access, and resources; (4) Synergize institutional change by being a catalyst for deconstructing racism and bias; (5) Engage in intercultural collaborative communication and actions of change.

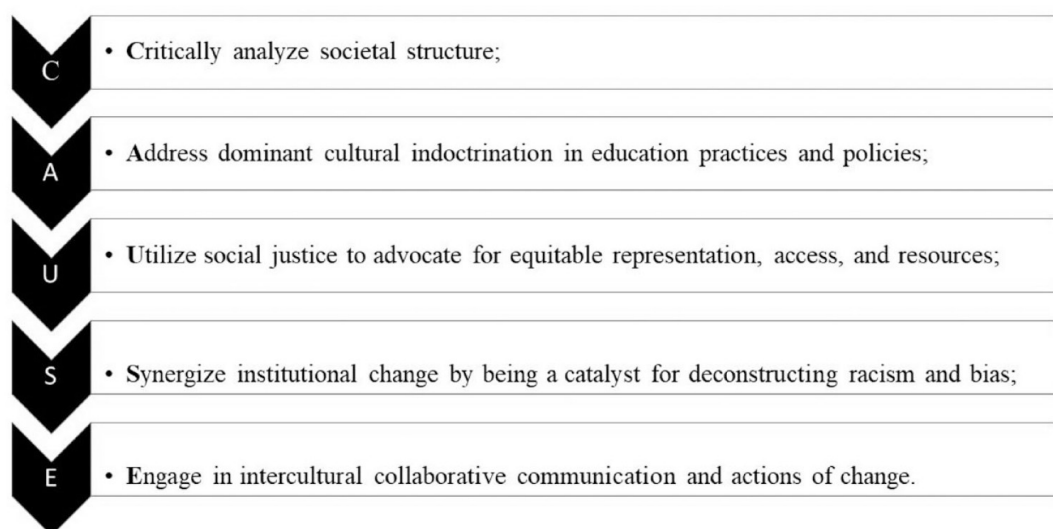


Figure 3: *The Five Key Tenets of Critical Race Structuralism*

As a combined approach evolving from critical theory, CRT, and structuralism, CRS contends that education should provide a safe space for critical discussions about race, class, and gender to create action in shared work, play, education, and living spaces (Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2011). CRS, given its attention to that which makes an individual a minority, is a useful tool in the analysis of otherness in contemporary Honors programs. Using the tenets of Critical Race Structuralism as a guide, stakeholders of Honors can engage minority Honors Scholars in meaningful discussions regarding current social justice issues and racial injustices that are becoming commonplace in the United States. Active facilitation of such dialogue may lead to a more culturally responsive educational environment for all students in Honors.

Research Design

The purpose of qualitative research is to understand and explain participant meaning (Morrow & Smith, 2000). More precisely, Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as, an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. Through this approach, the researcher builds a complex, encompassing picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (p.15). Thus, using a qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to study the phenomenon of otherness in its naturalistic setting.

Qualitative research has been an ideal tool in multicultural counseling research. Morrow, Rakhsha and Castaneda (2001, p.582-583) provide an array of reasons for using qualitative research to study multicultural issues. For example: (1) it includes context as an essential component of the research; (2) it addresses the researcher's process of self-awareness and self-reflection; (3) it is uniquely able to capture the meanings made by participants of their experiences; (4) scholars in the field of multicultural counseling and psychology have called for expanded methodological possibilities to address questions that cannot be answered using traditional methods; (5) its methods provide the opportunity for voices that were previously silenced to be heard and lives that were marginalized to be brought to the center.

Qualitative research inquiry is imperative in the field of urban education. Key phenomena in urban education have been established through research and have highlighted systemic inequalities for minority students. Phenomena in urban education, such as the school-to-prison pipeline, school pushout, and opportunity gap, have been shown repeatedly through research (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Milner, 2012). Considering the sparse nature of research on belonging among minority Honors students, qualitative research inquiry presents the necessary elements to fill such gaps. Other outcomes of educational research in urban educational settings

have been the establishment of theories, schools of thought, and pedagogical frameworks aimed at serving marginalized students. Educational research in urban educational settings is necessary to improve outcomes for urban students. However, certain areas of educational research have caused harm to marginalized groups, especially members of the Black community, through incorrect uses of quantitative data, such as intelligence tests or performance data, to make determinations about this demographic (Toldson, 2018).

A substantial amount of information related to educational phenomena can be discovered through qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative research. For K-12 students, this means greater insight into the challenges faced by students or in schools and the reasons for those occurrences. For undergraduate students, this means a more substantive collection of first-hand accounts of similar challenges. For marginalized students experiencing school in urban educational settings, qualitative research is particularly important for negating deficit narratives often contrived from quantitative data. In an article objecting to deficit notions about the supposed achievement gap, Toldson (2018) argued that “good” data is needed to truly assess student achievement, not “bad statistics” (p.193). Good data would provide a full understanding of the issue being analyzed because the data would include multiple factors that contribute to unfavorable outcomes (Toldson, 2018). Qualitative research inquiry can provide the good data Toldson (2018) described.

Qualitative research provides a more holistic view of the educational phenomenon being studied (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). This holistic view was necessary to negate false narratives about marginalized groups often used to disenfranchise, as well as to expose other factors contributing to unfavorable circumstances related to systemic issues rather than blaming individuals (Creswell, 1998; Morrow & Smith, 2000). This research heavily focused on the achievement of

minority students, with an emphasis on cultural sustainability and belonging. Qualitative research inquiry allows the exploration and identification of the complexities in this area.

Various research designs can be utilized in qualitative research studies, including ethnographic research, case studies, phenomenological research, grounded theory, participatory action research, and historical and narrative research (Lincoln, 1990; Mertens, 2019; Morrow & Smith, 2000). Ethnographic research places the researcher as an insider so they can understand the culture and lived experiences being studied (Mertens, 2019; Van Manen, 1990). Grounded theory qualitative research aims to develop a theory based on themes established through the collected data (Mertens, 2019; Morrow & Smith, 2000; Van Manen, 1990).

Whereas participatory action research is a collaborative study in which participants serve as co-researchers often used to promote self-determination or explore conflicts relative to power dynamics (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; McIntyre, 2000; Mertens, 2019). Historical and narrative research is situated in the context of the history of the research subject that is narrative-based (Ehrich, 2003; Mertens, 2019; Van Manen, 1990). Based on the areas of inquiry, this study was designed as a phenomenological case study. Phenomenological research focuses on individuals' subjective views on a particular phenomenon and is concerned with determining social meaning (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1995; Ehrich, 2003; Mertens, 2019).

Case studies focus on one specific case or instance of a phenomenon through thorough investigations of the historical background, physical settings, and many other contexts of the case (Mertens, 2019; Stake, 2005). A case study is a "...specific, unique bounded system" (Stake, 2000, p.463). A bounded system is a structure that is limited or bound to certain stipulations (Mertens, 2019). In this study, notions of belonging among minority Honors scholars who are at least eighteen years of age and currently enrolled in the University Honors Program served as the case in which the phenomenon was studied. Different types of case studies can be used based on

the desired outcomes of the research. The three main types of case studies are intrinsic case studies, instrumental case studies, and collective case studies (Crowe et al., 2011; Rudestam & Newton, 2015; Stakes, 2000).

Additionally, case studies can be designed as single or multiple case studies, depending on how many cases are analyzed within the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). This study was a single instrumental case study, as the findings were generalized to offer more context on the phenomenon (Crowe et al., 2011; Rudestam & Newton, 2015; Stakes, 2000). In the current study, notions of belonging among minority Honors scholars provided insight into the shortcomings of Honors programming in the context of cultural competence, relevance, sustainability, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Case studies can also be conducted as a specific study, such as a phenomenological case study, in which the participants' lived experiences relevant to the phenomenon make up the case that is explored (Mertens, 2019; Moustakas, 1994). The research method for this dissertation research will be a phenomenological case study.

Phenomenological research "...involves a return to experience to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p.13). Phenomenology is considered both a philosophy and a methodology that is connected (Qutoshi, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2020). As a methodology, phenomenology is either descriptivist or interpretivist, where interpretive phenomenology uses interpretation as a means of understanding (Heidegger, 1927/2011; Rapport & Wainwright, 2006). Ultimately, phenomenological research centers on subjective experiences to uncover what and how a lived experience is perceived (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1995; Ravitch & Carl, 2020; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Interpretive phenomenology aims to uncover how different individuals understand similar experiences or life events (Mertens, 2019; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The current study investigated the lived experience of minority Honors scholars in a

predominantly White undergraduate educational environment, thus in alignment with interpretive phenomenology.

Transcendental Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the suitable research design for this inquiry due to the nature of the research and the overall aim of the study. As a methodological approach, phenomenology explores the lived experiences of individuals, and its goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the essence of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). It investigates the “essential meanings of individual experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 104) and seeks to describe rather than explain the phenomenon in question. The sole purpose of phenomenology classifies it as well-suited to examine the lived experiences of minority Honors students and their experiences in an educational environment such as this. Although remnants of phenomenology are present in the writings of Kant, Hegel, and Brentano, German mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is noted most often for his contributions to the development of phenomenology. It is well-recognized that the history of phenomenology began in the philosophical discussions of Husserl’s works.

Originally known as a philosophical method, phenomenology has since transformed as numerous scholars, such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, have added their unique perspectives and methods of analysis. For instance, phenomenology can be referred to as a philosophy (Husserl, 1967), a sociological perspective (Schutz, 1967), an inquiry paradigm (Lincoln, 1990), an interpretive theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), and much more. Although these numerous interpretations are valid, for this study Husserl’s analysis is primarily considered because he is often considered the father of phenomenology. Employing Husserl’s analysis, it should be noted that “Husserl’s phenomenology is a Transcendental Phenomenology” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 45). Husserl used these two terms interchangeably, meaning they are synonymous with one another.

Phenomenology, also known as transcendental phenomenology, was derived from the contention around a philosophy of science that initially placed value solely on material things, not on the experiences of people who interacted with the material world through their consciousness. As greater value was placed on individual experiences, the need for phenomenology became more apparent, moving beyond the object world and validating each person's unique experience. Husserl's (1975) belief in consciousness and how experiences can act as teachers are exemplified in the statement below:

For me the world is nothing other than what I am aware of and
what appears valid in my cognition...I cannot live, experience,
think, value, and act in any world that is not in some sense in me,
and derives its meaning and truth from me. (p. 8)

As illustrated by Husserl's statement, phenomenology is interested in the essence of experiences, the fundamental meaning of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). As a research method, phenomenology uses in-depth, explorative interviews to gain a deep understanding of participants' perceptions of reality and the nature or meaning of their everyday lives (Patton 2002). Phenomenology contends that through consciousness awareness, we can only know what we experience (Husserl, 1913). In interpreting and making meaning of the world through subjective experiences, an objective reality is deconstructed. To this end, Van Manen (1990) asserts that phenomenology does not focus on the details of a phenomenon: location, frequency, etc. Rather, the true or underlying meaning of experiences is given priority.

To Edmund Husserl, the founder of transcendental phenomenology, this research design was cultivated to provide a means for surpassing numerous philosophical problems that have left contemporary scientific inquiry in a state of crisis. Although much of Husserl's philosophy focuses on the way phenomenology can cure this crisis, it is in his last major work that this task

is given its most systematic attention. In *The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1970), Husserl argues that the crisis of the sciences can be understood as a crisis of foundations resulting from modern science's failure to recognize both its philosophical origins and its grounding in human subjectivity (Buckely, 1990). For Husserl, contemporary science's rejection of its roots in philosophy and subjectivity constitutes an impediment to rational inquiry and leads to a crisis in its foundations.

Reflective Statement

My role as an advisor and instructor in this space, along with my educational background and beliefs on equitable educational experiences for minority students prompted me to further explore notions of belonging for this demographic. Additionally, my experience as an overseer of all co-curricular service commitments among Honors scholars encouraged me to explore this topic. While research on opportunity gaps, such as enrollment and retention for minority students in Honors remains prevalent, research on the relationship between the traditionally/overwhelmingly White environment that is Honors undergraduate education and notions of belonging among its growing population of minority students is sparse. For this reason, I decided to examine the notions of belonging among minority Honors scholars and how their race, class, culture, and collection of educational experiences impact their conception and/or sense of belonging.

As the researcher for this study, I acknowledge that my experiences as an advisor in the Honors College contributed to the study focus and design. I also acknowledge that my role as an instructor in Honors influenced the research direction of this study. Although none of the participants in this study were ever enrolled in any section of my courses, I understand that the positions of advisor/instructor are considered positions of authority in an educational

environment. Despite my proximity to these students and their plight in Honors, the main conjunction at which my experiences intersect with theirs can be found in my past. I know all too well the isolation and ostracization that otherness entails in a predominantly White learning environment. From pre-kindergarten to the eighth grade, I was educated in schools almost entirely comprised of White students. As an Honors student in k-12, I can safely declare that belonging was not a sensation that I felt much of, nor something I ever would have known to miss. Nonetheless, I will maintain an objective stance and aim to ground my interpretation and analysis in the data and relevant literature.

Participants

This study will take place at a mid-major public research institution in the southeastern region of the United States; specifically, within the Honors College of this university. Minority Honors scholars will be requested as participants in the study. The criteria for participation in this study are the singular or multiracial classifications of a “minority”: LatinX (including Puerto Ricans), African American, Asian Pacific American, Arab, and other Middle Eastern American, Indigenous American, Native Hawaiian, Inuit, or Alaska Native. Subjects must be actively enrolled in the University Honors Program for at least one year and possess reputable academic and extracurricular standing. Enrollment is not limited to the University Honors Program; Departmental Honors scholars are equally eligible.

Selection Criteria

Data for this study were collected from four to six minority Honors scholars who are second-fourth year college students in the US who are currently enrolled in an Honors Program at a University in the Southeastern region of the country, self-identify as LatinX (including Puerto Ricans), African American, Asian Pacific American, Arab, and other Middle Eastern

American, Indigenous American, Native Hawaiian, Inuit, or Alaska Native, and are age 18 and older to participate in this study. In alignment with the research objectives, purposive sampling was used for the intentional selection of participants to ensure that the research questions were adequately addressed (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Purposive sampling is often used by qualitative researchers and allows the researcher to find information-rich cases that can provide deeper insight into the phenomenon being explored (Patton, 1990; Ravitch & Carl, 2020; Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

The type of purposive sampling employed for this study was Criterion Sampling. Criterion sampling allows the researcher to select participants based on an established criterion needed to accomplish the goals of the study (Mertens, 2019; Patton, 1990; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). As such, a selection criterion was developed to outline the desired participants for this study in alignment with the goals of the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). The criterion for participation in this study is the following:

1. Participants must be currently enrolled in the University Honors Program at and be classified as second-year undergraduate students or higher.
2. Participants must self-identify as LatinX (including Puerto Ricans), African American, Asian Pacific American, Arab and other Middle Eastern American, Indigenous American, Native Hawaiian, Inuit, or Alaska Native.
3. Participants must be 18 and older to participate in this study and must have completed at least one Honors course in a U.S. high school.

The established criterion supported the research questions by specifying identity markers and experiences needed for participants to adequately represent the desired population of focus in this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2020; Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

The identity marker of minority students was included in the first research

question, which is why it was also part of the selection criterion. Due to the broad use of the identity classifications of minorities, an explicit description of a combined identity marker is included in the selection criterion to emphasize the exact demographic needed for this study. The first research question also included notions of belonging in the Honors educational environment to indicate that the researcher was interested in the impact of otherness on the overall topic of inquiry, which was belonging in Honors.

As such, the selection criterion included the completion of at least one high school Honors course as a qualifier that must be met to participate in the study. The selection criterion also specified what courses counted as advanced courses to prevent confusion around eligibility, which could result from the ambiguity of the phrase advanced courses. While different high schools have different titles for Honors courses across the country, AP, IB, and Honors are nationally recognized course distinctions for above-grade-level educational programs. Therefore, these distinctions were also included in the selection criterion.

Additionally, the research questions indicated that minority students currently enrolled in the Honors College are of interest; therefore, enrollment in an Honors Program at a University in the Southeastern region of the country was part of the selection criterion. Designated years of study were included with the college enrollment criterion to enable the researcher to collect meaningful data from the participants. Thus, the researcher was interested in collecting data from second-year through fourth-year Honors scholars in hopes that they might be better equipped to reflect on the sensitive concept of belonging in Honors. To efficiently locate participants that meet the selection criterion, the researcher recruited students from the honors college within a medium-sized public research university in the southeast. The researcher has instructed in the Honors College and taught an Honors course at the time of the study. Participant recruitment from the Honors College enabled the researcher to access minority

students who have completed Honors coursework. Participants were recruited through class announcements and emails to students who met the criteria and an announcement requesting participants during an Honors College-specific organizational whole group meeting.

Data Collection

Before interviews are conducted, all participants will read and sign an informal consent form. During data collection, participants will participate in an open-ended, semi-structured, audio-recorded interview (later transcribed), which will roughly last 45-60 minutes. The interviews will be conducted via Zoom and audio recorded. This virtual interview setting was chosen to accommodate the schedules of all participants and distance participants from the setting in which the subject of the interview is derived.

Semi Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were also used as a data collection method in this study. Research interviews are used to delve deeper into the lived experiences of the study participants and their construction of reality concerning the topics explored (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Interviews can either be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, which informs the interview protocols (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2020). The purpose of a semi-structured interview is to obtain “...descriptions of the life world view of the interviewee to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p.6).

Interview protocols were established before conducting the interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Since the interview was semi-structured, the protocols were used as a general guide for the interview but were not restricted to a specific order or wording

and allowed opportunities for follow-up and probing questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

Interviews took place virtually using video conferencing technologies.

The use of these technologies allowed the researcher to record and caption the interviews to assist with transcription accuracy. Some pros of using interviewing as a research method include a deeper examination of language and concepts related to the topic explored, as well as more insight toward the matter studied that leads to the production of knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Creswell, 1998). The cons of interviewing include ethical issues such as misinterpretation by the researchers or leading the interviewees through probes, as well as issues with dynamics between the researcher and the interviewee (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Relational, context and contextual, non-evaluative, person-centered, temporal, partial, subjective, and non-neutral interviewing values and characteristics were considered when developing the interview guide and conducting the interviews (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

Data Analysis

Screening and individual interview data will be analyzed and used to create a case summary of participants. Audio recording files of individual interviews will be transcribed and coded for themes. Interview data will be analyzed on an interpretive level using a constant comparative analysis to develop themes. The coding process includes precoding or initial coding, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). At each stage of coding, the data will be reduced to conduct a thorough and more reasonable analysis. The emerging themes will then be used to explain the overall meaning and outcomes of the research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

Validity

In the present study member checking will be used to guarantee an accurate representation of participants' views. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and

confirmability will be accomplished not only by way of member checking but also through the measures taken by the researcher to ensure all considerations are taken into account. To ensure confidentiality, all Zoom research data in this study (audio interviews/transcriptions) will be conducted and stored (according to OneIT Level 2 research data handling and storage standards) on a OneIT-Provided Network Drive (H:, J:, S:, etc.) with limited access via password protection.

The researcher's personal UNCC/OneIT-issued laptop will be the sole device used in the completion of this research.

Additionally, pseudonyms for the university, department, and students will be used as well. Participants will be required to sign a consent form before the inception of all facets of this research. A confidentiality statement will also be signed by participants before the focus group session. The confidentiality statement will be read to participants during the opening of the focus group session. Audio recordings of individual interviews will be stored in a password-protected digital filing system on the primary investigator's OneIt-protected Network Drive.

Summary

This project will be a phenomenological case study that centers on the subjective experiences of minority Honors scholars and their sense of belonging in the Honors undergraduate educational space. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What factors influence minority students' decision to join the Honors Program?
2. What aspects of being a minority contribute to minority students' notions of belonging in the Honors Program?
3. What elements of the Honors Program, in particular, contribute to minority students' sense of belonging in Honors?

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the lived experiences of Honors scholars of color at the intersection of race, class, culture, and education to best assess and subsequently define belonging in a contemporary Honors learning environment. Data analysis will be conducted through the use of qualitative research by way of a transcendental phenomenological approach. This section presents an explanation of transcendental phenomenology, an explanation of the setting and participants, data collection, data analysis, risks and benefits of the research, ethical consideration, and confidentiality and trustworthiness of the study. All of these will serve their respective purpose with the ultimate aim of excavating the lived experiences of minority scholars at the intersection of race, class, and culture in the Honors educational environment.

Risks and Benefits of the Research

This study poses minimal risk to informants. Some risk may come in the form of the emotions that may be connected to the stories told about their life experiences particularly if there is some form of negativity connected to a particular experience. Due to the deeply personal nature of the research study, participants may experience some emotional distress. Participants will be referred to counseling services at their own cost if the researcher deems it necessary. Informants will have the right to decline any question they want and withdraw from participating if they feel uncomfortable at any time. Great attention will be paid to social cues and participants' body language to minimize risk factors.

This study provides a means by which minority Honors scholars can share their lived educational experience, as an underrepresented subgroup within the field of higher education; specifically, Honors. Their voices have the potential to contribute greatly to the establishment of more culturally responsive programming and curricula across the Honors landscape. This work is equally significant as it provides a platform to candidly recount and discuss the unique experiences and perspectives that exist, concerning minority experiences in Honors. Likewise,

this study has the potential to benefit the informants, because they will have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and also share their stories in a safe space.

Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality

Ethics should be highly prioritized when working with participants in a research study. Considering ethics, confidentiality is the utmost goal of this study. Participants will be given anonymity and their personal stories and experiences will be confidential. The following steps will be taken to ensure confidentiality: Individual interviews will be transcribed and de-identified. At any point in the study, if participants wish to withdraw, they may do so. The inclusion or exclusion of their data in the study will be dependent on continued informed consent. Accessibility of the data will be limited to the researcher and the researchers' committee members. All findings related to the study will be shared with the researcher's dissertation committee for cross-validation of interpretation.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include a one-dimensional research environment: one Honors educational environment rather than multiple. An additional limitation would be the autoethnographic approach that will be applied to this research; although autoethnography is a legitimate research design, it is confined to the interpretations of the writer and actively excludes the extensive input of other stakeholders.

Assumptions

The study will be conducted with the following foundational assumptions: 1) the solicited sample used will be willing participants; (2) participants will offer earnest responses to each interview question. Additionally, all willing participants will be a representative sample of the population of minority Honors scholars.

Summary

In sum, this chapter presented the research method for the study. It also addressed issues of reliability, validity, triangulation, and trustworthiness of the data. Additionally, the chapter presented the theoretical frameworks of CRT and CRS for the analysis of the findings. In the next chapter, the study's findings and themes are presented.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This study's overarching goal is to evaluate the lived experiences of Honors scholars of color at the intersection of race, class, culture, and education to best assess and subsequently define belonging in a contemporary Honors learning environment. Thus, the purpose of this chapter was to offer the results of the collected data used in this quantitative inquiry. The goal was to look at the demographic information and evaluate the research questions that were given by conveying and outlining the research's overarching themes and providing context for how those themes were formed. The data's recurring themes were developed via iterative comparison analyses of the transcribed data collected by the involved participants. A passage from the in-depth interviews are also included in this section to back the theme. The subsequent research questions guided this study:

1. What factors influence minority students' decision to join the Honors Program?
2. What aspects of being a minority contribute to minority students' notions of belonging in the Honors Program?
3. What elements of the Honors Program, in particular, contribute to minority students' sense of belonging in Honors?

Participant Summaries

The demographic information of those who responded was used to understand the personalities and backgrounds of the people who took part in this study. Participants' specific identifying information, such as racial classification, social classification, gender, and description of educational environments, were the primary demographic variables covered by this research. The results are detailed in the below:

Table 4*Summaries of Participants*

	Racial classification	Social classification	Gender
Participant 1	Black	Upper-middle class	Male
Participant 2	Asian American or Vietnamese American	Upper middle social class	Female
Participant 3	Black	Middle social class	Male
Participant 4	Latina	upper-middle social class	Male
Participant 5	A mixture of Hispanic and Mexican	Lower middle class	Female

Overview of the Participants

Participant 1 was born in Pittsboro, North Carolina, a very small town close to Chapel Hill, and was raised there for 17 years. This Participant was a male in both gender and biological sexual orientation, whereas his racial classification was from Black ethnicity. Nonetheless, the Participant was from the upper-middle social class. In describing the demographic characteristics of the education environments, this Participant has revealed that at elementary school, all his teachers were white other than one. Nonetheless, his middle school and high school were not too diverse and only had black and white races. However, the longer he progressed, the more diverse it became, and it involved other races, like the Hispanic race, and only maybe two or three Asian populations were in the class. This Participant was involved in honors classes such as the Middle

School Honors Society and AIG. Additionally, this Participant was associated with an educational group known as My Mood is Food.

Participant 2 was born in Charlotte but was raised in Belmont, which is a predominantly white town. Additionally, the gender or biological sexual orientation that was associated with this Participant was female. Additionally, her racial identity was an Asian American or Vietnamese American. The Participant noted that she came from a family between the upper and middle social classes. In elementary school, the Participant was pretty much surrounded by white kids, and at some point, she did not know what other races were like. However, in High School, the Participant took all honors classes and only talked to those kids who were also in honors classes or the National Beta Club or the National Honor Society. Lastly, the last educational environment was that she got into the Honors College Program at the university.

Participant 3 was also a native of the city that the Honors College in question occupies and was born and raised in said city due to his family planting roots in this area many years ago. The involved respondent was male in both the gender and biological sex identity. Additionally, the Participant was black in the racial classification, and he came from a family of middle social class. In describing the educational environments, this Participant went to CMS from his elementary school, while for middle school, he went to a private Christian school with a total of around 250 students, which was a big culture shock. However, the high school was a charter school and was not typical as it was a combination of six through 12, where they were all in this one building. The four clubs this Participant was part of were the National Honor Society, Senior Beta Club, Mu Alpha Theta, and Chick-fil-A Leader Academy.

Participant 4, involved in this research, was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and was raised his entire life from birth until 18 in Bayamon, Puerto Rico, his family's area of residence. The gender identity and biological sex of this Participant were male. Furthermore, with regard to

his family income, the Participant belonged to the upper-middle social class. However, this Participant was of Latina ethnicity. In the description of the education environments, the Participant went to a Catholic school for his elementary school, where he stayed there all the way until middle school, which was a very stressful environment due to being bullied for all eight years of his school life. Nonetheless, going into high school, the Participant switched schools from 9th to 12th grade to another Catholic school. Lastly, his final year was in their honors program, which covers all of Puerto Rico.

Participant 5 was born and raised in Charlotte, North Carolina, and has been there her whole life. Participant 5 identified as female, based on both gender and biological sex orientation. In addition, the Participant 5 belonged to the lower middle class and was classified as a mixture of Hispanic and Mexican by the ethnic classification. When describing the educational environments, this Participant mentioned that she attended Charlotte Mecklenburg, CMS, her whole life and also went to Morehead, now called Governors Village. Nonetheless, she attended regular public school for kindergarten and then Stony Creek for her first and fifth grades. However, she attended James Martin for all honors and joined Vance High School, now called Julie's Chambers, which was the last class to graduate with Zebby Vance High.

In general, based on the demographic results provided by those who participated, it can be indicated that they were a cohort of both male and female students and were associated with Black/African American racial description who had considerable background in the educational environments of between elementary, middle, and high school. As a result, they had the credibility as avenues for discussing and allowing the conduction of an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of Honors scholars of color at the intersection of race, class, culture, and education for best assessing and subsequently defining belonging in a contemporary Honors learning environment was established. The subsequent segments of this section explain the

themes identified from the research and illustrate their origins from the information gathered. Following this, the chapter ends with a synopsis of the principal discoveries from the themes.

Introduction to Study Themes

The individual interview sessions with the five participants (students) were utilized to gather data from which the themes for this investigation were developed. Employing the written transcripts from every interview, the interview data were organized into categories for identification of the themes and used to generate a case overview of those who participated. Therefore, through the utilization of the electronic platform Zoom, the transcripts from the in-depth interviews were produced. A re-evaluation of every interview recording and a revision of the electronic transcripts were performed to ensure the precision of these transcripts before the coding phase. However, the process of precoding involved extracting original phrases from the transcripts. Following this, there was a discussion of the five themes and their subthemes. The major themes involved the following: 1) fostered identity pre-college; 2) Representation in Honors; 3) community in honors; 4) social and emotional safety in honors; and 5) belonging in honors. The discussion of the identified themes and subthemes is predicated on the study's query to which they correspond.

In connection with the initial research question concerning the factors that influence minority students' decision to join the Honors Program, one theme and two sub themes were obtained. The second research question investigated whether the aspects of being a minority contribute to minority students' notions of belonging in the Honors Program. In accordance with the second question, the second and third themes were developed. However, in assessing the third research question, which involved determining the elements of the Honors Program that particularly contribute to minority students' sense of belonging in Honors, the last two themes represented its evaluation. As such, every theme and subtheme are elaborately described,

accompanied by an explanation of the underlying research question arrangement that influenced its conception. However, despite all participants responding to all questions, not all responses supported a theme. Therefore, since a theme is designed from feedback supporting a similar claim, some of the major themes and subthemes designed did not include the feedback of all 5 participants but only transcripts that supported a similar claim.



Figure 4: Study Themes

Theme One: Fostered Identity Pre-College

In an attempt to understand the factors that influence the minority students' decision to join the Honors Program, the data provided by the participants revealed that fostered identity pre-college was a major factor. Based on the participants' feedback, fostering an honors identity among pre-college students could potentially assist in students' decision to join the Honors Program, given that the school environment is an element associated with Honors students'

recruitment and retention. The indications of every Participant on how fostered identity pre-college affected their decision to join the honors program are described in their reflection below based on their view regarding the honors environment;

Subtheme 1: Honors Environment as Students Fostered a Sense of Identity

One of the ways in which the students fostered a sense of identity to join the Honors Program was through the factor of the honors environment. From the given feedback, honors students are better able to concentrate, experience less anxiety, and exhibit better emotional and behavioral control when the honors atmosphere is positive. As a result, this form of environment may significantly impact the developed sense of identity among students. The reflections of all participants are illustrated below;

In support of the subtheme of the honors environment as the students' fostered sense of identity, Participant 1 offered the following viewpoints when asked whether he thinks the honors environment is a safe space for him:

... but I think an Honors College is like, "Oh, get to know all these people and become comfortable with them because you guys all share the Participant thing of being an Honors College. So you guys should get to know one another and become great friends and best buds forever.

These illustrations suggest that there is a high chance of comfortability due to the shared experience of being in the Honors College.

Similarly, Participant 2 also supported the views of Participant 1 when asked to offer her personal description regarding the Honors environment, due to the particular professors within the Honors environment, she felt more comfortable and safer which as a result fostered her involvement with Honors college. She gave the following viewpoints:

I definitely think that in general, yes. But I definitely feel more comfortable and safe with specific professors and being with a specific group of people in the Honors College, such as you and yourself, and just being with like-minded individuals like me, who are also in the Honors College.

In addition, while Participants 1 and 2 reflected on the Honors College environment enhancing students' comfortability, Participant 3 revealed that the Honors College environment offers a fascinating experience to the Honors students, which, as a result, builds community and solidarity within one another since students come from different places and high schools. His sentiments were as follows:

Okay, for the Honors College environment, I would definitely say that it's an interesting experience. I think that it really helps to be able to build community and solidarity within one another because, with this program, I think it's a lot about community building, friendship, and with a lot of the additions that we have like the service events and socials and the enrichment as well as the affinity groups that we have. ... So I think that it's really been a great environment for me personally, to build my network and have trusted professionals like yourself, who invested in me and my future and then also just being able to take some truly interesting classes.

Despite Participant 3 proving that the Honors environment improved the student's comfortability, Participant 4, on the other hand, revealed that due to its dynamicity, the Honors environment could influence the students in their quest to join the Honors program. The information from the participant 4 was as follows:

It truly is a dynamic environment. Well, I said about my elementary and middle school, you do have this feeling of family in terms of; I have only been in the

honors program for about a year and a half ... It truly is a program where you get to meet a lot of students, especially when you are a freshman. And it is a door that is very much wide open to getting to know people on campus when you are brand new and probably know nobody. So, in that way, I truly believe it is an amazing program in terms of both academic and social aspects.

Thus, while it can be inferred that due to the dynamicity of the Honors environment, the students are able to know each other, which, as a result, promotes their academic and social aspects, Participant 5 contrasted with Participant 4 as she suggested that the choice of the Honors College was due to it being a diversified setting. She provided the following feedback:

But I feel like the Honors College is more diverse than like your typical classes. I mean, I feel like there still needs to be more diversity, there needs to be more diversity; there's not that many Hispanics as there are like white people. But it is definitely better than State. That's where I was gonna come to, the reason why I didn't like State-- Well, it's not that I didn't like State, just like when I went to tour, it was all white people, like every single person was white, I rarely saw any other minority groups ... Because it's worse over there." I feel like, there's not that many Hispanics or minority groups over there. I like how the engineering program has females in it, specifically my program. There's a lot of females that are like engineering professors. And that's really motivating. I am like, "Oh, if they did it with a group of guys, I feel like I have a chance too."

The above suggestions imply that due to the importance of diversity in the Honors College, exceptional Honors students, faculties, and staff collectively foster an environment conducive to continued intellectual development and establish a solid groundwork for lifelong learning.

Thus, the findings identified above lead to the conclusion that due to its dynamic nature, diversification, and capability to offer a fascinating experience, the Honors environment is an important factor that the Honors students consider before joining the Honors program.

Subtheme 2: Rigor of the Honors Curriculum

The rigor of the honors curriculum was also identified as another factor that is considered for fostering pre-college among the students. Based on the reviews from responses, rigor results from assignments that stimulate students' thought processes in novel and engaging manners. Therefore, the rigor of the honors curriculum ensures the development of curiosity, which motivates the Honors students to discover what they do not know, and this results in the development of an advanced comprehension of the basic concepts. The reflections of the two participants whose feedback helped in designing this subtheme are given below:

With respect to the rigor of the curriculum, Participant 1 revealed the motivation from this aspect, which is that it helps students take classes and share their experiences concerning honor. The assertions that were provided by this Participant are as follows:

It's not rigorous. My opinion is that anyone can take these classes and have a lot more to share than the people who are within honors.

However, despite Participant 1 providing short feedback, it can be inferred that being a member of an Honors College served as evidence of their dedication to learning and academic prowess in order to have a lot of experience to share. On the other hand, Participant 4 offered a deviating view by stating that rigors in the curriculum improved his engagement with the community. His inferences were as follows:

Well, the first year, especially my second semester, did hinder a little bit of my opinion because first years, you have a lot of work getting used to the program.

It's not horrible work. It is community, engagement, and community service. That

was actually some of the most engaging opportunities I got to participate in that first year. But it does put weight on your schedule ... But overall, I would say, having gotten used to it, especially by the second semester and third semester, it hasn't really changed my view on this on the dynamic of the program. Overall, I think it's just enhanced it.

The narrations from Participant 4 suggest that the rigor of curriculum enables learners to cultivate trustworthy connections with members of the community, which ultimately fosters their sustained collaboration and academic involvement.

Therefore, from the given feedback of the two participants, it can be concluded that the rigor of curriculum function is an important factor that motivates Honors students in their quest to join the Honors program since it improves the students' engagement with the community and offers help that is required in taking classes and sharing their experiences concerning the honor.

Theme Two: Representation in Honors

The representation in honors was another major theme that was identified as a factor of the Honors Program that has impacted the minority students' experiences and sense of belonging in Honors. In this regard, being represented in the Honors program by faculties enables students to see their teachers as allies, helping them understand the value of following the rules' requirements.

Participant 1 saw the relevance of being represented in the honors by a Black advisor or someone who a person can go to while in Honors College as an opportunity to impact the minority students' experiences and their sense of belonging in Honors. The illustrations below represent his sentiments:

I think relating to someone would be extremely hard for a Black male, like the only Black person that may be an advisor higher up is Dr. Todd and you. And

whether that's to say they make that connection, or they don't, they are still kind of not on their own, ... So I think that it's extremely different and feeling as if you have someone to go to while you are in Honors College, whether that's about school life or anything else. So, just being able to relate to someone or feeling like you can talk about certain topics while in class that others may not relate to but you are still comfortable talking about.

The information from Participant 1 means that by being represented by a Black advisor, the students receive support that constitutes perceived racial and ethnic similarities among themselves and the staff, as well as confidence in the Honors College's capacity to address their individual needs. Participant 1 also added that being represented by impactful faculties contributed to their sense of belonging in the honors program. He revealed the following response:

But yeah, I think the staff is the most impactful. You all are so good. Dr. Todd would just talk to me. What's her name? She's black. She's with Levine.

Whatever her name is. She's really cool. Even Dr. Gyles gets past the shuffle.

He's just put in the work. I think the staff is the most impactful.

Nonetheless, the feedback of Participant 1 means that those who work as professors or lecturers at universities have made honors students accomplish a lot and built their lives around learning, which allows them to grasp the importance of a lifelong sense of belonging in the honors program. Participant 2 provided a different sentiment for the aforementioned theme by revealing that being represented or surrounded by people of the same color influences the students' experiences and sense of belonging in Honors. She revealed the following:

Yeah. And I feel like, more often, those instructors and the people that I surround myself with in the Honors College are people of color.

Additionally, respondent 2 revealed that having faculty members of the same color improves their sense of belonging in Honors since they can have a deep conversation with these black faculty members in comparison to those who are white. Her utterances are as shown below:

Like I said earlier, having faculty members of color makes me feel like I belong because I feel like if our faculty was predominantly white, I feel like I wouldn't be able to have deep one-on-one conversations with them, such as we have with you, Mr. Peter.

Alternatively, given the above two responses of Participant 2 revealed that having conversations and being represented with faculty members of the same color constitute the approaches and factors to consciously foster a feeling of belonging among Black students at largely honors colleges, Participant 3 was able to draw on her extensive background in the manner in which staff representation contributed to the sense of belonging and experience since minority students are able to have a sense of community. He made the following statement:

I would say that it has allowed me to feel like I have a sense of community, and even within Honors, I think representation is important. Having like leadership figures like you and Interviewer has been encouraging me in terms of my college career, but also, just like the racial mix, I think that it allows people to kind of feel like they see themselves within this specific program.

Additionally, participant 3 also showed a significant relationship with his faculties/staff since they offered him advice, which revealed that he was well-represented in the matters associated with the honors program, and as a result, his sense of experience and belonging was improved. The indications below show the feedback of this Participant:

Basically, being able to come to them for advice and hearing their perspectives on how they become successful in their lives. And basically, given me career advice,

as well as just educational advice, or just life advice in general. I think that you all being accessible, and when you see me, you are always acknowledging me, and asking about my progress.

Conversely, despite the feedback of Participant 3, meaning that due to the career and life advice and the perspectives offered by faculties/staff, honors student's sense of belonging is enhanced, Participant 4, on the other hand, believed that the staffs were able to provide resources and help out with regular scholarships in the university which enhanced their sense of belonging and experience. He provided the following sentiments:

Well, four specific that are coming to my mind: Ms. Dee is one of the main Advisor for the Honors College, especially when you were a freshman in the Honors College. And she has always been an amazing resource to go to for anything you need in the Honors College. No matter what year you are, she will always be there to help you and almost always will have an answer; surprisingly, even though she is extremely busy, she will always be there for you, as well as Dr. Gyles. He is the Scholarship Advisor for the Honors College. My first year, I just decided to meet him, just because I thought he could help me out with just regular scholarships in the university. And after that first meeting, he got me to apply to fellowships that would help me study abroad ...

Additionally, Participant 4 identified their sense of experience and belonging has also been improved due to representation by the faculties, who are supportive since they have been of great assistance to him not only with his internship but also with the honors curriculum and extracurricular activities and enhanced the urge to be an ambassador among the minority student. The following are direct quotes from Participant 4:

... The other one I have talked to as my interview, Mr. Peter, from the first time I met with him, has helped me a lot, not just with my internship as he helps with the honors curriculum extracurricular activities, he has also been a great resource just to talk to you from time to time ... And the 4th, I would say, is Dr. Todd; Dr. Todd is one of the heads of the Honors College, and I have not met him till recently through my student ambassador work. But ever since I became a student ambassador, he has been great; he has been very supportive of my work ... He has truly been a great resource whenever I needed them.

Participant's 4 narrations above mean that due to being well represented, the Honors College is home to a number of groups that encourage students to go beyond the confines of their disciplines and develop their critical thinking and creative capacities which as result improves their sense of belonging.

Theme Three: Community in Honors

Results show that various community factors such as social status, race, and gender are considered significant contributors to minority students' notions of belonging. Based on the participants' feedback, given that a sense of belonging in an Honors environment constitutes an educational setting in which one feels accepted, respected, included, and supported, community factors of the minority will contribute to how the minority Honors students perceive their sense of belonging in the Honors Program.

Subtheme 1: Social Class as a Contributing Aspect to Notions of Belonging

One of the ways in which the community played a role in the honors program's sense of belonging among minority students was through the factor of social class. From the participants' feedback, social class influences a student's chances of being accepted into a specific type of school, their potential for academic achievement, the employment opportunities available to

them, and the social circles they associate with. As a result, it may have a considerable influence on their sense of belonging in the Honors program, particularly when they are associated with families that are financially constrained. Four participants supported this subtheme, and their reflections are illustrated below;

With regard to the subtheme of social class being an impact factor of the notions of students' sense of belonging in the Honors program, Participant 1 offered support by providing the following viewpoints:

I think you only really view social class when getting to know the student; depending on the specific classroom, you get to know that, and mostly everyone I have interacted with, I would assume, comes from mid or upper. I think I have only met a couple that may be lower ... So I think if someone were like a lower class, they would feel a little bit timid because they wouldn't know how to navigate in a way that makes them seem upper class because most people want to seem like they are in a higher class ...

However, despite Participant's 1 indications meaning that social class, either lower or higher, significantly impacts the student's sense of belonging because they know their counterparts in the classroom in which they are enrolled, Participant 3 supported these views by regarding social class as a factor affecting the student's notion of belonging. He recounted the following in their interview feedback:

... And I think not only does it apply to people of lower social classes, but I also think that higher social classes also get a bad rap because a lot of times, people look at them like they are hampered or are snobbish because of the way that they are, the position that they are in. But I think that if we can see past all that and just recognize that they

can affect us as we interact with one another, we can share perspectives about where we come from and how our lives have been,

The above feedback means that the student's notion of belonging is attributed to either lower or upper social classes due to people looking at them like they are hampered. Likewise, Participant 4 supported the above subtheme as she gave her feedback to the interview when asked whether social class has contributed to minority students' sense of belonging as follows:

I would say that, especially in contrast to the honors program, when I was before college, that honors program required a lot of paying; it required a membership. That was something that even my family and I considered a lot before accepting becoming an honors student. And that especially an expectation I had coming into Honors College in university is that it was not going to be free; it was going to be expensive. But the good thing about this Honors College, and I think it's something that someone from a lower socio-economic status would appreciate, is that this Honors College for the first two years, you get financial aid ... So I truly believe that because of the way this Honors Program works, even if you are a lower socio-economic status, it truly does not judge you on that.

Therefore, given that the feedback of Participant 4 clearly supports the notion that student ought to consider the factor of their social class, in particular, either upper or middle class, Participant 5 also supported these views by stating that students ought to consider the factor of their social status in order for them to join Honors College and the major they need to pick. He stated:

And I feel like the people in the Honors College that already have; they are like, upper middle class, they don't have to worry about, I guess, picking a hard major compared to minorities or people that want to succeed, and people that like, do better than what their parents have done.

In summary, the feedback from all four participants helped reach the conclusion that social class, especially the middle and upper classes, was a significant factor contributing to the students' notions of belonging in the Honors College.

Subtheme 2: Race as a Contributing Aspect to the Students' Sense of Belong

Minority students' sense of belonging in the honors program was also found to be influenced by the community in various ways, one of which was the influence of the race or ethnic background of this group of individuals. Building on the comments made by those who took part, honors students value a sense of belonging at school, but those from historically marginalized ethnic and racial communities may have heightened worries about this issue due to the ways in which their social identities expose them to harmful stereotypes and various emotional threats of feeling 'out of place' notion. The support of the identified subtheme is provided in the below reflections from involved participants:

Participant 1 provided support for the fact that the race or ethnicity of minority students in the honors program affects their sense of belonging. His indications are as illustrated below:

I think now, my class was the class, or maybe even a little bit before, where it became much more diverse. In the classes that I have been in, it's really only like, two or three black female individuals, maybe one black male, individual, Pacific Islander, or Asian or any other races. It's pretty low, male and female. So I think that the minorities that our Honors students try to link up with either keep it more so a secret that their honors are not something that most people know, and people aren't privy to that information.

While Participant 1 identified that race is a key aspect affecting students' sense of belonging, Participant 4 likewise also contributed to the identified subtheme by revealing that other students were interested in knowing where she came from. She narrated:

I would actually say it can sometimes enhance it. I know that personally being Latino, I have met a lot of honors students who are very interested in where I come from, especially having moved straight from Puerto Rico to here. They are very interested in “Why this University specifically and why this Honors Program?” And I have met a lot of different people from different races. And it is a very diverse program. And I think that’s a very good thing because I have learned a lot from friends of all different backgrounds. And it truly has been a very eye-opening experience. And also, just fellow Latinos, people who are Latino like me, we have talked about our experience of being Latino honors scholars, as well as just being here in university.

Provided that Participant’s 2 narrations mean that being Latino in honors college improved the engagement between the students as they sought to know why he chose the Honors program, which, as a result, affected his sense of belonging, in her personal conversation, Participant 5 provided contrasting viewpoints, where she indicated that coming from a different race coincided with lower grades. Her sentiments are as follows:

I feel like it does. It does affect their experience. Because you want to succeed in the Honors College, you can definitely succeed with A’s and B’s, but you want to get all A’s to prove-- I guess it’s just to prove to people that you are capable of doing it. Because for some people, it comes like really easy, and for some people it doesn’t, but when I see someone, like a white person, do the bare minimum of studying and then they score higher than me. I am just like, “What did I do wrong? Now, I have to work like two times harder to prove myself that I am either as equally as smart as that person, which I shouldn’t do,” but it’s just like,

habit, not habit, but it's just like, "I want to prove to myself that I am capable of doing," even though nobody is keeping track.

The above response of Participant 5 means that being a student from a different racial background contributed to higher chance of being given actual grades which would negatively impact the students' sense of belonging.

Therefore, the feedback from the interview with the above majority of participants all agreed that the race or ethnicity of the minority of students in the Honors Program was a key component of their sense of belonging.

Subtheme 3: Gender as a Contributing Aspect to the Students' Sense of Belonging

The last community component in the honors program that contributed to the minority students' sense of belonging was the gender of this group of minorities. In the context of the honors program, "gender of the minority" meant that despite this factor being of lower impact as only two participants agreed to affect variation in the sense of belongingness; however, it can be deduced that students from marginalized groups report lower levels of sense of belongingness, and these differences are gender-specific, demonstrating the substantial influence of intersectionality and minoritization on this construct. The reflections of those participants who contributed to this subtheme are as shown below;

In his personal interview, Participant 1 went into greater detail regarding whether being a male helps in making connections, which, as a result, contributes to the sense of belonging in the Honors program. This Participant spoke about the aforementioned subtheme as follows:

I think it may be harder for males to make connections outside of honors, maybe because all the males that are in honors now know some of them are friend-ish. I don't know; as a female, there are a lot of women in Honors scholars, but that doesn't say that I talked to them for real. But I know, I feel very comfortable ...

But I don't think gender has too much to do with honors core experience, overall.

Black males, yes, but that's just extremely specific.

Based on the above assertions, Participant 1 suggested that by being able to build connections, black male students are able to integrate new information with the existing body of knowledge between themselves and their surroundings. In contrast, for Participant 4, the idea of gender was based on certain people not being included due to different pronouns. He made the following note:

Well, that would depend on which people are in the Honors system. There are some people who are not as inclusive as others. But from what I have personally seen, even when people have different pronouns and different genders, it has always been very inclusive; I have had very diverse classes, not only in racial background but also in gender.

The feedback of Participant 4 supports the notion that one simple method to demonstrate respect is to use the appropriate pronoun since the issue of pronouns, whether deliberate or not, can irritate, offend, and divert attention, which could affect the student's sense of belonging. This viewpoint was supported by Participant 5, who believed that the gender or biological sex of an honors scholar impacted their honors experience. She stated the following:

... but I know, nursing, there's a lot of girls, and then there's a few guys. And then I feel like they are kind of intimidated, I guess, in a way, because it's not common for them to be in the nursing program. Same with engineering as well, going back to engineering. I feel like I also need to prove myself sometimes when it comes to engineering homework or engineering work in general. The thing is, he's in an Honors College, this person was in an Honors College, but he doesn't go to class. He doesn't do well in class, but he still ended up with an internship

and I applied to so many I couldn't get one last summer. And I was pretty upset about it. And I think gender has a big part to do with that.

Thus, it was clear from the responses of the aforementioned interviewees that the Honors Program's minority students' gender background played a significant role in their feeling of belonging in the Honors experiences.

Theme Four: Social and Emotional Safety in Honors

In an attempt to identify the elements of the Honors Program that contribute to minority students' sense of belonging in Honors, the data revealed the theme of social and emotional safety in honors. Based on the responses given, social and emotional safety extends above the confines of the classroom and is implemented to assist Honors students in cultivating abilities to regulate their emotions, exercise self-control, and engage in constructive interpersonal exchanges within the honors. The theme discussed below illustrates how the Honors students experienced social and emotional safety in honors.

The feedback from the participants confirmed that knowing and associating with other students of the same color ensures that the Honors student experiences social and emotional safety in the honors.

Participant 1 admitted that his association with and knowing people of his race supported his social and emotional safety in honors. His feedback is as stated:

Knowing the Black Honors students that I do and the way we converse with one another and everything like that, I think it's more so the drive aspect. I don't know what qualifies an Honors student, but I definitely think that drive and how much you try in classes because I am in a lot of classes with one Black female who was in one of my other classes for honors. I definitely think that I have connected more now because we are in a regular class at the Honors College.

Similarly, the respondent backed his views by revealing the following:

I guess just talking to people that are like me in terms of race and also drive, that's really it. I get along with a lot of students. But it seems like now seeing people that also work as hard or even harder that are in honors, that also Black is super dope. I think that's really cool. I also saw minorities, in general, just doing certain opportunities that are offered by honors or outside of honors just offered within the school or outside programs and seeing how much they put in the work in order to get those things.

The feedback above justifies that some students may seek partnerships with others of the same race to feel welcomed and safe within the environment of their Honors College. Likewise, Participant 2 mentioned feeling safe when she talked to a female friend of color about what was spoken in class. She asserted:

One of the female individuals I was talking about was talking to her about what was spoken in class. I feel like conversing with her, and also, being another woman of color in the Honors College, we were able to talk about similarities that we had in terms of courses, our personalities, and how we got to join Honors College. So, I feel like speaking to another Honors College, who has a similar background to mine, makes me feel like I belong since we both are in Honors College.

The indications above mean that when confronted with the institutionalized racism they encounter in college, students often find solace in making friends of the same color. Similarly, Participant 3 confirmed the views of Participant 2 as he revealed that meeting people who looked like him and with different majors contributed to him making good connections. She asserted the following:

I think that helped out because I was able to meet people who looked like me but also were different from me. Different majors and things like that helped them find out what caused them to choose the paths that they went down. So I think that within that, I was able to make a lot of good connections with people and then also some of my closest friends within the Honors College.

Additionally, Participant 3 continued to emphasize that Honors College individuals offered assistance and guidance for him to succeed. His utterances are shown below:

All the other honors college professionals that I have had are just Honors College individuals who are there, who truly want to see me succeed, and who are always there if I need them for assistance and guidance.

The above feedback meant that the social and emotional success in the honors program was contributed by the assistance, guidance by honors college professionals, and meeting look-alike people with different majors. On the other hand, Participant 4 also felt his social and emotional well-being due to becoming a student ambassador, which helped him interact with and help a lot of freshmen and other members of the Honors College. He mentioned:

I would say, especially I have become more recently, last semester, I became a student ambassador here at the Honors College. And that has been one of the greatest experiences I have had on this campus. I have gotten to help a lot of freshmen as well as just other members of the Honors College, work through choosing what classes they should take. What professors should they take? Helping them just around campus overall. And it's those interactions that have truly impacted me and have really gotten me to love this program as much as I do.

Despite the participants indicating that they felt safe by talking to people of the same color or offering help, Participant 5, in contrast, indicated that knowing a friend of her age in the Honors College helped motivate each other. Her utterances are shown below:

I guess, my friend, I have a friend in the Honors College. I have known her since high school, and she's in the same boat as me. I feel like we are around the same- We are the same age. We are also in the same economic class, and we both got into Honors College. And I feel like we motivate each other to stay in it, in some sense. She definitely motivates me; I see that she's very hard-working. And she does a lot for UHP [University Honors Program]. I feel like she's my main motivator; she hasn't really said anything to-- I don't know, I just feel like she's in there. And we have come from that same high school, which makes me feel like, "Okay, I belong here too," we are both Hispanic, too ...

These participants' indications mean that when students have friends of the same age, they are more likely to work together, share what they know, and stay motivated, all of which lead to feeling they belong to the Honors social and educational environment.

Thus, from the given feedback, it can be inferred that knowing and associating with students of color and age helped the honors students be socially and emotionally safe in honors, making it a significant determinant of the minority students' sense of belonging in Honors.

Theme Five: Belonging in Honors

In the assessment of the elements of the Honors Program that contribute to minority students' sense of belonging in Honors, the feedback from the participants identified the theme of belonging in honors, which represented their feeling of whether they belong in the Honors College. From the interview, belonging in honors illustrates that belonging is essential for the educational, social, and emotional development of students. Therefore, by establishing a

connection between representation and belonging, Honors learners are equipped with a potent instrument to discover and harness honors program capabilities.

Participant 1 detailed in his interview how he believed he belonged in the Honors program. He described the following:

Yes, I do. I don't know what deserving and not deserving are, truly. But I think that the way I move and the things I align myself with do align with the activities or the volunteering or just the wanting to help others or help myself even, I think that's definitely aligns with like, maybe the Honors student idea, if that's the idea that they are trying to push on, who gets in.

The above feedback means that the way he moves and the things he aligns himself with contribute to being part of the honors program. However, Participant 2 contrasted with Participant 1's feedback by indicating that she feels she belongs in honors due to the people and the friends that are in the Honors College. She offered the following views:

I think I belong in Honors; it hasn't been too hard. It hasn't been too easy either. However, because of the people and the friends that I make inside the Honors College, they also make me feel like I belong.

Participant's response indicates that not being too hard and making friends in the Honors College makes them feel they belong in the honors program. On the other hand, Participant's 3 interview feedback was found to contradict Participant 2 since he perceived honors as being an extended program and having the ability to provide something for himself. His response was as follows:

Yes, most definitely. Not only that, but I feel like I belong in honors in the most literal sense. Honors itself is an extended program that I am part of. And it's just one part of my college experience. But in addition to just the Honors itself, I

really feel like, all the people that I have met and interactions that I have had with people in the Honors College, I think that I definitely belong because I am able to provide something of myself like as in my perspectives, and my knowledge, and I am able to interact with people on my level and different majors.

Even though Participant 3 main confirmation was that meeting new people and the interactions that come with it is an essential factor to consider himself belonging to the honors, Participant 4 gave that due to being smarter and a hard worker, there was proof that he belongs in honors. He narrates:

I would say so. I do believe I belong in honors; I would not say I am the smartest guy out there. But that's not really what honors is about; what honors is about is just being a hard worker and keeping your grades at a good level, which I would say honors doesn't have that big of a high standing. It has a very relative standing to where you do the work. And if you are there consistently, you can be an Honors student, and I believe that I belong as an Honors student.

Since Participant's 4 feedback means that to belong in the honors, one must have a smartness and intelligence identity, Participant 5 also agreed with the assertion as she indicated that she belonged in honors since everyone was super smart and intelligent. This Participant revealed the following:

I do feel like I belong in honors. No, I try my hardest to get good grades in every class. And I do the requirements that the Honors College tells me to do so I feel like I belong. I have never felt like I didn't belong. Maybe the first semester. I was like, "Oh, I don't know, is this for me?" Because everybody is super smart, super intelligent. So I felt like a little like, "Oh, am I an Honors student?" But I feel like now, as I have progressed over the years, I feel like I do belong.

Therefore, the provided supporting feedback confirmed that as a result of being super smart and intelligent, hard-working, honors itself being an extended program, and the people and the friends that are at the Honors College being supportive, all the participants believed they belonged in honors.

Chapter Summary

Significant insights were provided about the lived experiences of Honors scholars of color at the intersection of race, class, culture, and education to best assess and subsequently define belonging in a contemporary Honors learning environment through themes and sub-themes associated with this research issue. The findings of the study indicated that Honors students give considerable thought to the Honors environment prior to enrolling in the program, owing to its dynamic nature, ability to provide an intriguing experience and diversification. Additionally, results showed that an essential motivating factor for Honors students to join the Honors program is the rigor of the curriculum function, which enhances their community involvement and provides the necessary assistance to complete coursework and share honor-related experiences. Nonetheless, results have shown the representation by faculty and staff in honors facilitates students to perceive them as allies, thereby instilling in them an appreciation for the importance of adhering to the program's regulations, which, as a result, has significantly affected the experiences and sense of belonging of minority students. In addition, based on the findings, social class, particularly the middle and upper classes, the gender of minority students enrolled in the Honors Program, and the race or ethnicity of the minority students were all substantial community determinants that influenced the students' perceptions of their notions of belonging in the Honors College. Furthermore, findings have revealed that understanding and forming connections with students of similar color and age facilitated the social and emotional

safety of honors students, significantly influencing their sense of belonging within honors.

Lastly, results revealed that all participants felt a sense of belonging at the Honors College due to their exceptional intelligence and smartness, the extended program nature of the program, and the supportive environment provided by the faculty and other students. The next section, illustrating the conclusion, addresses the research's implications, the drawbacks of the research, and suggestions for further investigation.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The current chapter finalizes the dissertation by discussing the findings presented in the previous chapter regarding already published literature on minority experiences in a high-achieving undergraduate program and the theoretical framework used by the researcher to guide this research. The data for this research was collected from five participants based on different racial, social, and gender classifications who are actively enrolled in the University Honors Program for at least one year and possess reputable academic and extracurricular standing. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the study participants. Following an in-depth analysis of the findings, the main themes emerging from the study were: fostered identity pre-college, representation in honors, community in honors, social and emotional safety in honors, and belonging in honors. The sub-themes that were further identified were honors environment, the rigor of the honors curriculum, social class as a contributing aspect to notions of belonging, race as a contributing aspect to the student's sense of belonging and gender as a contributing aspect to the student's sense of belonging. The current chapter commences by presenting an overview of the theoretical framework adopted by the researcher to guide this study and, subsequently, discussing the themes using the theoretical framework and relevant literature presented in Chapter 2 of this study. The impacts of the study on Honors leadership and Honors faculty members will also be discussed in the current chapter. The chapter will be finalized with a discussion of the study's limitations, recommendations for future research, and the study's conclusion.

5.1. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the Critical Race Structuralism (CRS)

The current research was guided by two main theories that the researcher considered relevant: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Structuralism (CRS). Critical race theory is considered a practical approach for exploring the racial inequalities experienced within the

education system by challenging the notions suggesting that racism is more of an individual prejudice, with Bell (1995) describing it as a colorblind ideology. At its core, critical race theory is anti-racism by encompassing affirmative action, integration, civil rights, and other liberal measures, leading to an argument that racism is embedded across social and legal structures, contributing to the constant limitations faced by people of color as evidenced in the text by Robin DiAngelo (2018) who perceived white individuals to be linked with social, economic, legal, and political privileges and rights that others are not accorded the same. In an education context, the critical race theory acknowledges the inequality in accessing resources, implicit educator biases, and biased curricula in perpetuating racial achievement gaps in society. While applying the critical race theory in education is coupled with controversy, Ladson-Billings (1994) contends that most critics of the critical race theory fail to comprehend the goals of the theory by suggesting it promotes racial guilt and division among the population. The polarizing sociopolitical nature of the critical race theory has often been attributed to the complex language used when discussing this theory, which Gina Castle-Bell (2017) suggests is a language barrier. The misinterpretations experienced within these complex discussions induce different levels of xenophobic reactions as the whiteness concept triggers many individuals into defensive mode.

The second theoretical framework adopted by the researcher to guide the present research is critical race structuralism, which builds on the foundation of the critical race theory. Critical race structuralism focuses on explaining the ethnic and racial connections within institutional and social systems based on social structures, culture, gender, and race (, by highlighting the history master narrative marginalizing the experiences of minority groups in society. Combining these two theories suggests that critical discussions should be accorded safe spaces within education to allow different discussions surrounding gender, class, and race, creating shared action through

education, play, living, spaces, and work (Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2011). Adopting frameworks like critical race structuralism in the education sector contributes to creating safe spaces that foster culturally responsive learning environments by recognizing ongoing inequities and historical injustices and empowering students from different backgrounds to drive positive social change.

The three guiding questions for this theoretical framework are:

1. What factors influence minority students' decisions to join the Honors Program?
2. What aspects of being a minority contribute to minority students' notions of belonging in the Honors Program?
3. What elements of the Honors Program, in particular, contribute to minority students' sense of belonging in Honors?

While the current honors programs still need to address the lack of diversity in undergraduate programs adequately, the lack of promotion of enrollment and retention of students from diverse backgrounds limits the association of these programs with culturally diverse Honors populations. The subsequent sections discuss the themes based on the three research questions in regard to already published literature and the theoretical framework that guided this study.

5.2. What Factors Influence Minority Students' Decision to Join the Honors Program?

5.2.1. Fostered Identity Pre-College

The present study reported on the different approaches that students use to nurture a sense of identity while joining the Honors program, including the learning environment. Furthermore, the findings alluded to improved concentration levels, healthier behavioral and emotional control, and reduced anxiety levels within positive learning environments in Honors programs.

The participants' shared experiences of being in honors college improve their feelings of comfort and safety, which increases their involvement with the honors programs. Per CRT and CRS, the participants' view of the honors program environment on improving the comfortability levels of the students suggests that it creates a sense of solidarity among the students, thus building a community since the students come from diverse backgrounds. This permits the students to network with each other as well as engage with different education professionals in the honors program. The dynamic learning environment was further suggested to influence the choice of students starting the honors program, which permits them to meet and engage with different individuals, hence promoting their social and academic aspects in a diversified learning environment.

This is similar to the previous research by Coleman and Kotinek (2010), Coleman et al. (2017), and French (2019), which suggested that the sense of belonging felt by individuals accessing the same institutions promotes support and security through identity affirmation, inclusion, and acceptance. Also, in line with the presented findings, Raisanen (2023) suggested that the accessibility of support services and increased sense of belonging significantly support Honors program students from underrepresented backgrounds in Honors programs, often completing their education to graduation. Singla et al. (2023) held a different sentiment from the above researchers and the presented findings by suggesting that Honors programs in college may unintentionally promote discrimination over the formation of high elite spaces that are inaccessible to the majority, leading to the underrepresentation of marginalized groups. Although the current study presented different experiences of Honors program students on the factors that influence minority students' decision to join the Honors Program, the presented responses were

only limited to the individual responses of the study participants, hence limiting the findings. Nonetheless, these arguments suggest that Honors programs provide significant advantages for student well-being, learning, and identity development.

In light of CRT and CRS, the current research findings suggested that the rigor of the curriculum significantly influences minority students' decision to join the Honors Program, which is a result of the thought-stimulating assignments ensuring curiosity development among the students, thus motivating them to discover new information that is currently unknown to them, leading to advanced understanding of basic concepts in the curriculum. The availability of classes that allow the students to share their different experiences concerning the Honors program motivates most students to join the program, increasing the students' dedication to academic prowess and learning through sharing experiences. In addition to the above reasons for students from minority backgrounds joining the Honors programs, the participants' responses alluded to the significance of a rigorous curriculum in cultivating healthy and trustworthy connections with the academic community through academic involvement and collaboration. These findings are compatible with the previous research by Bastedo and Gumport (2003) on the variation in enrolment and active participation of minority students in honors programs, highlighting the tension between diversity, access, and academic standards within the higher education system by suggesting that the failure of retaining minority scholars through collaborative improvements within the honors programs at college level limits the access to higher education by students from a minority background, thus reducing their representation and retention. Hilton and Jordan (2021) also acknowledge the complicated interconnection of social,

political, and social factors in developing an organizational structure and strategic direction of higher education systems.

Similar to Participant 4's experience with a rigorous curriculum inducing a sense of engagement, community, and community service, this study supports the argument presented by Napolitano and Killinger (2021) that the majority of the honors programs in American colleges provided in more recognized and older institutions involve their students in rigorous experiential practices that exemplify the opposite of inclusion and equity. In line with the guiding theoretical framework, Wiggan et al. (2022) further suggested that CRS reveals the variations in racial groups, suggesting that different students experience different motivations for joining honors programs in colleges. While the above arguments are significant to this research, future researchers should also consider exploring the various student motivators for joining Honors programs in depth.

5.2.2. Representation in Honors

The study findings identified the significance of representation in influencing minority students to join the honors programs by improving their sense of belonging. Through the frameworks of CRT and CRS, Honors participation can help improve students' sense of belonging if there is meaningful diversity, equity, and inclusion work taking place. This means that purposeful anti-racism work must go on in these spaces, as well as multicultural curriculum and culturally responsive practices (Banks, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Wiggan et al., 2020). This is evidenced by the ability of the students to view their educators as friends, helping improve their comprehension of the significance of following the required rules. Based on the responses provided by the study participants, the current study emphasizes the importance of

students receiving support from Black advisors with whom they share ethnic and racial similarities, hence improving the students' confidence levels in addressing their individual needs within the honors program. This finding was backed up by the argument presented by Coleman et al. (2017), suggesting that the unique education environment in honors program education is significantly increasing its exposure, expansion, and expediency capacities. On the other hand, Ticknor et al. (2020) alluded to the balancing of Honors students of color in their representation within the Honors program, suggesting that they, too, want to feel seen, at peace, and prepared for the future. This was evident in the presented findings, in which the participants alluded to the accomplishments made by honoring students who built their lives around learning, increasing the sense of belonging amongst this population.

By mirroring the findings of the current research suggesting that same-race faculty members improve the sense of belonging among the Honors students through deep conversations, the National Collegiate Honors Council (2002) acknowledged the role of the academy in providing a counterbalance but suggested that renewed interest from academia in creating reduced ecological and ethnological niches after the displacement of regional interests by globalism on the national agenda. Based on the above arguments, it is evident that increased representation in the academy improves the experiences and sense of belonging among Honors students through optimized Honors curriculum and extracurricular activities to increase ambassadorial roles among minority students.

Student representation is a significant factor when deciding on an honors program at the college level, with the present research findings alluding to the representation of students with faculty members of the same color influencing the different factors and approaches for fostering

the feeling of belonging among black students within Honors program colleges. For instance, one of the study participants alluded to the significance of leadership figures who mentor and encourage them in terms of their careers in college. Further, the findings revealed that the staff members providing advice increased the representation of minority students in matters linked with the honors program. Coleman et al. (2017) presented evidence that mirrors the above findings, suggesting that Honors program educators have higher expectations for their students to increase the sense of high achievement within the classroom. Based on the reported findings, it is evident that same-colored professors are more approachable when seeking advice in terms of education, career, or life in general. As evidenced by the findings, the provision of life and career advice provided by the faculty members enhances the sense of belonging among Honors students. This was contradicted by the previous research by Ballantine and Hammack (2016), who alluded to a confusing tradition element in Honors programs, unconsciously and consciously eliminating the difficulties experienced by students of color. This negatively impacts the trajectory of careers and lives of Honors students of color. The above arguments highlight the significance of representation and mentorship in developing a conducive and welcoming learning environment for Honors program students. The study also acknowledges the significance of addressing the potential exclusionary practices within these programs, which was in line with CRS, suggesting that the differences within racial groups are more pronounced than the variations across various racial groups. Based on the discussion above, Honors program educators must explore institutional and social inspection of the structural prejudice, bias, and racism in the Honors program spaces.

5.3. What Aspects of Being a Minority Contribute to Minority Students' Notions of Belonging in the Honors Program?

5.3.1. Community in Honors

The current findings indicated that social status, race, and gender are major causal factors that make minority students in honors programs feel a sense of belonging while attending these programs. The study participants specifically alluded to the increased feelings of inclusion, support, respect, and acceptance as significant contributors to creating a community of minority students attending honors programs. This is similar to the previous research by Hilton and Jordan (2021), which suggested that implementing targeted intervention for curricular improvement, admissions processes, and recruitment practices increases recruitment and retention of students from lower socioeconomic and minority backgrounds. Based on the participant's responses on the role of community in increasing the sense of belonging in the honors program among minority students, it was identified to be through the social class. This study supports the argument by Mead (2018), Braid and Quay (2021), and Redford and Hoyer (2017) that socioeconomic status, while being a significant measure of diversity when measuring the level of equity in honors program education, is not a contributing factor when making in-state and out-of-state comparisons for diversity. Through the responses from the study participants, it is evident that the chances of minority students being accepted in a specific honors program are influenced by their social class, as put forth by Braid and Quay (2021), alluding that it can dictate their academic achievement potential, access to employment opportunities, and their associations with social circles. The findings also build upon the arguments presented by Cognard-Black and Spisak (2019) on comprehending the expectations of Honors students from minority backgrounds, which can improve the experiences and access to support services by minority

students. The inclusion of access, diversity, equality, and equity within educational spaces, as suggested by French (2019) and Hilton and Jordan (2021), helps create clarity for Honors students from minority backgrounds. Despite the current research presenting diverse perspectives and views of Honors students on the components that increase the sense of belonging in Honors programs, the presented responses were limited to individual experiences, thus reducing the external validity of the presented findings.

As mentioned in the literature review, inclusive community building is one of the ways to increase the recruitment and retention of diverse students from minority backgrounds, alongside targeted recruitment practices, holistic admissions, cultural immersion experiences, and course-level improvements. The results of this study indicated that the primary influence of community is based on the ethnic or racial background of the individuals, suggesting that individual conversations and engagements are mainly dependent on their backgrounds. The findings further revealed the influence of gender on the sense of belonging among Honors students. While the sense of belonging presented different variations based on gender, based on the findings, it was deduced that students experiencing the lowest sense of belonging originated from marginalized groups with gender-specific differences, thus acknowledging the considerable impacts of minoritization and intersectionality on this aspect. This finding is consistent with that of Braid and Quay (2021), who reported on the significance of integrating dynamic systems to enhance the comprehension and reflection of urban environments indiscriminately of gender. Although these results are consistent with some published studies (Ticknor et al., 2019; NCES, 2017; Scott et al., 2017), they differ from those of Cognard-Black and Spisak (2021), who suggested that the sense of belonging based on gender was influenced mainly by the number of admissions made

from the minority group, since most often the variations across honors programs based on diversity and the level of representation relative to the learning environment the students find are in, limiting their ability to fully integrate with the community and experience a heightened sense of belonging. This inconsistency might be attributed to the varied cultural backgrounds of the minority students within dominant spaces, as in the study by Bastedo and Gumport (2003). These results might further indicate that Honors program students experience a stronger sense of belonging when surrounded by individuals sharing their backgrounds. In order to create a full picture of the experiences of minority students in Honors programs, additional studies are needed that focus on the specific cultural backgrounds that influence the sense of belonging among Honors students.

5.3.2. Social and Emotional Safety in Honors

The study set out to identify the factors contributing to the sense of belonging, subsequently enhancing the social and emotional safety among Honors program students. The findings presented in this study show that emotional and social safety experienced by Honors students extends beyond the classroom walls and further aids the students in the development of skills for engaging in constructive discussions, practicing self-control, and emotional regulation. These findings are in agreement with those obtained by Singla et al. (2023), who reported on the impacts of exclusionary tactics used by prestigious institutions in reducing the level of diversity within these elite spaces, thus encouraging the promotion of diversity based on minority backgrounds and allowing them to practice self-control and emotional regulations while attending honors programs in spaces that have often been only accessible to select few individuals within the community. Keeping in line with the arguments presented by Singla et al.

(2023), these findings also supported those of Hilton and Jordan (2021), who addressed the concerns that honors programs mainly cater to the needs of students who are academically privileged in terms of recruitment and retention in these Honors programs involving students from diverse and minority backgrounds. This approach was evidenced in the study to be effective and aligned with the theoretical framework guiding the research. For instance, in line with the critical race theory, as Bell (1995) alluded that racism cuts across different spheres in life, suggesting that the relationship between the American education system and minority groups, specifically Black Americans, has often been marred by racial controversies, disproving the ideas of Cognard-Black and Spisak (2019), who held the presumption that Honors program students, indiscriminate of their racial backgrounds, are all high-achieving, hardworking, diligent, and resilient. These findings cannot be generalized to all Honors students in colleges, as the participant responses were limited to a small demographic of students who have, through their responses, illustrated how to engage with individuals from their race often. Therefore, it can be assumed that confronting institutionalized racism within Honors programs education, students find comfort in befriending individuals from the same background.

While the current research presented the experiences of minority students in a high-achieving undergraduate program, the majority of the presented findings focused on the association between minority students and each other and the benefits of these interactions between minority honors program students. Based on the interview responses, this interaction provides students from minority backgrounds with guidance and assistance that would help them succeed in their learning experience. This was evidenced by the participants' responses, which indicated the major role played by professional educators in promoting and inducing the sense of belonging of the minority Honors students, with Participant 3 revealing that they felt more

comfortable engaging with minority students of the same gender as them. Contrary to the assumptions made by the researcher that the institutionalized racism experienced by Honors program students in colleges pushes these students to withdraw from their peers, the current study findings suggest that minority students seek out their fellow students sharing the same backgrounds as them to find social and emotional safety through their interactions throughout the honors program education. However, per CRT and CRS there is a need for systemic institutional changes that would make these Honors programs a more inclusive space. The participants noted cases of alienation, but they were able to form their own systems of support to help mediate racism. This aligns with the CRS which argues that the relationship and patterns between social structures, gender, race, and culture often arise in education. This is further supported by Raisanen (2023), who suggests that the provision of support services to both minority and dominant student groups in honors programs improves the sense of belonging, helping these students achieve their educational goals. This was evidenced by Scott et al. (2017), who, in their research, revealed that 50% of the student population is made up of 30% of minority scholars. Hence, the above arguments suggest that minority students seek out their fellow minority counterparts to feel they belong to a community. Future researchers should consider including students from the dominant population to understand their experiences engaging with students from minority backgrounds in high-achieving undergraduate programs.

5.4. What Elements of the Honors Program, in Particular, Contribute to Minority Students' Sense of Belonging in Honors?

5.4.1. Belonging in Honors

The third research question of the research sought to identify the elements in honors programs that contribute to the sense of belonging of honors students. The current study found that the study participants experienced belonging in honors through different illustrations, suggesting that belonging is crucial for the emotional, social, and educational development of minority Honors program students in colleges. The findings also revealed that developing a relationship between student belonging and representation provides Honors students with a vital instrument for discovering and harnessing the capabilities of the Honors programs they are enrolled in. Hence, there is a need to align the curricular and extracurricular activities to meet the needs and preferences of the minority students in these programs.

The social capital gained from the interactions and engagement between minority Honors students increases the sense of belonging among the Honors program students, suggesting it is not challenging for the students to make new friends belonging to the same honors program as them. These results are in accordance with the earlier studies by Coleman et al. (2017) and French (2019), which suggested that learning environments are often considered conducive to white elitism and maleness, limiting the interactions of individuals from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, French (2019) pointed out the microcosmic nature of the educational environments, which need more cultural responsiveness within the honors program. Hilton and Jordan (2021) provided a different perspective of the presented findings, alluding to the focus on the lived experiences of the students within the honors program learning environment, with the aim of

increasing the comprehension of both the scholars and educators about the connection between education, race, class, and culture in honors. Consistent with the literature by Ballantine and Hammack (2016), this research found that meeting new people is also essential. However, regular interactions induce confidence and assertiveness in the Honors program students, thus, their sense of belonging in the program. These results may be explained by the fact that the presence of role models and peers coming from similar backgrounds aid the Honors students in connecting with the education program while unlocking their full potential. Despite these promising results, questions still need to be answered regarding how the honors programs balance the provision of culturally specific activities while encouraging participation by all students, irrespective of their background.

The findings presented in this study have presented the significance of forming good relationships with individuals from the same background, which has been evidenced to improve their experiences in honors program education. This was evidenced in the responses on meaningful friendships, such as improving college experiences for Participant 3, increasing a sense of belonging by interacting with individuals with shared experiences with Participant 2, and aligning themselves with volunteering activities that align with their background experiences. The majority of the study participants have alluded to the honors program being an extended program, allowing these students to access their ability for provision. Nevertheless, while the findings highlighted the significance of interactions in promoting a sense of belonging among Honors students, the responses pointed to the students being hard-working and intelligent as proof of belonging within the honors program. This was also supported by the study conducted by Coleman et al. (2017), suggesting that despite the high standards set for minority

students by their educators, despite the students having high life expectations of themselves, this approach by educators ensures that Honors classrooms often exhibit a high achievement atmosphere. This was a mirror to the responses by Participant 4 and Participant 5, suggesting that Honors program students are expected to have intelligence and smartness identity. Overall, these arguments suggest that friendships formed between students from the same backgrounds increase the sense of belonging among Honors students, thus meeting the aims of the research evaluating the experiences of honors program students in attaining a sense of belonging in a contemporary Honors learning environment.

5.6. Summary of Discussion

The themes discussed in this section related to the experience of minority students in high-achieving undergraduate programs and the factors contributing to the choice made by the students to join these honors programs, and the promotion of the sense of belonging among the students. The discussed findings revealed that positive learning environments within the honors programs increase the sense of identity, reduce anxiety, and enhance the concentration levels of minority Honors students, hence fostering feelings of safety, comfort, and belonging in the program. The discussion also revealed that minority Honors students must see other students and faculty members who come from similar backgrounds achieving success with the honors program, thus motivating the minority students to join and actively participate in the program. Although there was limited focus on the impacts of a rigorous curriculum stimulating curiosity among the students, allowing them to identify new sources of information. Nevertheless, the findings have also highlighted that some of the Honors programs have been created elitist spaces unintentionally. Regarding critical race theory and critical race structuralism, the findings have evidenced that positive learning environments can counteract the isolation feelings that minority

students often experience while in a space where white individuals dominate. On the other hand, while the findings pointed out the attractiveness of a challenging curriculum, the critical race structuralism theory contended that neutral standards implemented in the Honors education programs limit students from schools lacking adequate resources. The subsequent sections discuss the implications of the study, the limitations of the research, future research recommendations, and the conclusion of the study.

5.7. Implications of the Study

5.7.1. Implications for Honors Leadership

As outlined in previous chapters, the experiences of minority students engaging in Honors programs have been focused on the factors that influence their decisions to join these programs and the contributing factors that increase their sense of belonging. The current findings have significant implications for the honors leadership aimed at increasing recruitment and retention rates of minority students in their Honors programs to maintain diversity across the board. Based on the presented research findings, the provision of a positive, supportive and inclusive learning environment significantly reduces the anxiety levels of the enrolled students. Furthermore, adequate representation of minority students by successful faculty and other students coming from similar minority backgrounds serves as a motivating factor for minority students to join the honors programs in colleges. Furthermore, these findings implicate the curriculum used in the program, suggesting that a rigorous and challenging curriculum induces curiosity among the students, hence expanding their thirst for knowledge.

5.7.2. Implications for Honors Faculty

Based on the analysis and discussion, these findings have significant implications for honors staff and faculty members. As revealed by the study findings, the honors staff members

are expected to use inclusive teaching strategies that serve the varied student needs in terms of learning styles and backgrounds. Furthermore, these educators need to explore the impacts of microaggressiveness and implement approaches that constructively address and increase the awareness of microaggressions in perpetuating racial and ethnic stereotypes. Mentorship opportunities by the Honors faculty members for minority honors students should be provided through support and guidance since they can significantly influence the recruitment and retention rates of minority students from diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, the honors faculty and staff are expected to support the minority Honors students in creating and expanding their student groups that address their varied interests and needs. In addition, the honors staff members, based on these findings, are expected to organize activities and social events for the minority Honors students to foster interaction amongst individuals from diverse backgrounds. Lastly, while these findings have evidence that students from diverse backgrounds often interact and engage with students with similar backgrounds, honors faculty staff are expected to have practical conflict resolution skills for mediating and resolving conflicts arising due to the cultural variation among the students. By bridging the resources gap through workshops, Honors faculty members help minority students from under-resourced backgrounds achieve success in a high-achieving undergraduate program.

5.8. Limitations of the Study

While the presented research findings answered the research questions adequately, the present research was also impacted by several limiting factors. For instance, the limited sample size ($n=5$) limited the generalizability of the presented findings across other educational settings. The researcher's biases, experiences, and background impacted the interpretation of the study

findings. While the selected methodological approaches for this research were justified, the qualitative research approach fails to establish the cause-and-effect relationship, instead, it succeeded in exploring the relationships between different factors and describing experiences, without showing the causation effect.

In addition, despite the inclusion criteria adopted by the researcher involving the target population meeting the requirement for answering the research questions based on their responses, the excluded participants from dominant backgrounds did not participate in the research and provide their experiences with minority students in honors programs, thus limiting the external validity of the presented findings. The additional perspectives from these individuals would have provided more profound insights into the research problem. The researcher bias was addressed by the researcher conducting member checking with the participants to ensure the interpretation of their responses was accurate. In addition, the researcher conducted process tracing with the study participants by documenting their actions, experiences, influences, and decisions in order to identify the contributing factors to a sense of belonging and the potential causal chains.

5.9. Recommendations for the Future

The findings from this research exploring the experiences of minority students in a high-achieving undergraduate program provided significant insights into the notion of belonging among Honors students. Subsequently, they led to a more culturally responsive learning environment. While these findings are significant, future researchers should aim to increase a wider pool of study participants, more than 5, to increase the generalizability of their findings by including broader and more diverse study participants from various socioeconomic, ethnic,

racial, and gender backgrounds to increase the researcher's comprehension of the different factors impacting the sense of belonging among Honors program students. In addition, it is recommended that future researchers conduct longitudinal research tracking the study participants over time to comprehend the long-term effects that Honors programs have on the sense of belonging, academic and professional careers, and social connections of the students.

While Honors programs have historically been a more or less White space, there is a national need for greater diversity, equity, and inclusion. As noted in the introduction of this study, nationally, 90% of Honors administrators are White and almost 50% are female (NCES, 2017). The Honors' student population is primarily White and lacking a significant amount of diversity. According to Cognard-Black and Spisak (2019), on average, Black students are least likely to be recruited in Honors programs. The Honors curriculum is also a reflection of those who hold the power and have privilege, which often presents omissions and suppressed minority contributions. As such, there is a need for institutional and systemic changes to help promote greater diversity in Honors representation and in the curriculum.

Future studies addressing the experiences of minority students with honors programs should also consider including the experiences of majority students to offer an all-inclusive view of the social dynamics existing among students from diverse backgrounds and how they interact with each other and experience a sense of belonging. By future researchers addressing the highlighted areas, their studies can successfully build on the present findings and offer significant insights for developing supportive and inclusive Honors programs benefiting the students regardless of their diverse and unique backgrounds.

5.10. Conclusion

The current study aimed to evaluate the lived experiences of honors scholars of color at the intersection of race, class, culture, and education in order to assess and define the sense of belonging in a contemporary Honors learning environment. This study has shown that the development of supportive and inclusive learning environments creates a sense of identity and supports the well-being of honors students, rendering these programs attractive to other individuals. Further, the results of this investigation highlighted the benefits of honors staff adopting a rigorous curriculum coupled with fully interactive classes to motivate students from minority backgrounds to engage in classroom discussions by providing these students with significant opportunities for connecting with their peers and faculty members. Furthermore, the presence of successful students and faculty from similar minority backgrounds serves as a motivating factor for minority Honors students, hence increasing the sense of belonging and comfort. The findings of this investigation also complemented findings from already published studies exploring the factors that contribute to the sense of belonging. The present study adds to the growing body of research that indicates that the shared experiences between minority students based on gender, race, and class foster a sense of community and belonging.

REFERENCES

- Alexander M. (2012). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New Press.
- Ballantine, J. H., Stuber, J. M., & Everitt, J. G. (2016). *The sociology of education: A systematic analysis*. Routledge.
- Banks, J. A. (1996). *Multicultural education, transformative knowledge, and action: historical and contemporary perspectives*. Teachers College Press.
- Banks, J.A. (2020). *Diversity, Transformative Knowledge, and Civic Education: Selected Essays (1st ed.)*. Routledge.
- Bastedo, M. N., & Gumport, P. J. (2003). Access to what? mission differentiation and academic stratification in u.s. public higher education. *Higher Education*, 46(3), 341–59.
- Baum, S., Ma, J., Pender, M., & Welch, M. (2016). *Trends in Student Aid*. New York, NY: The College Board.
- Bell, G. C. (2017). *Talking black and white: An intercultural exploration of twenty-first-century racism, prejudice, and perception*. London: Lexington Books.
- Bell, D. (1980). Brown v. board of education and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review*, 93(3), 518–533.
- Bell, D. (1995). Who's afraid of critical race theory? *University of Illinois Law Review*, 4, 893-910.
- Braid, B., & Quay, S. E. (2021). Place, self, community: City as text in the twenty-first century (Ser. NCHC Monograph). *National Collegiate Honors Council*.
- Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Sage Publications.

- Cognard-Black, A. J., & Spisak, A. L. (2019). Creating a profile of an honors student: A comparison of honors and non-honors students at public research universities in the united states. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 20(1), 123–57.
- Coleman, L. L., & Kotinek, J. D. (2010). Occupy Honors Education (Ser. NCHC Monograph Series). *National Collegiate Honors Council*.
- Coleman, L. L., Kotinek, J. D., & Oda, A. Y. (2017). Occupy Honors Education (Ser. NCHC Monograph Series). *National Collegiate Honors Council*.
- Creswell, J.W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Crowe, S., Cresswell, K., Robertson, A., Huby, G., Avery, A., & Sheikh, A. (2011). The case study approach. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 11(1), 1-9.
- deMarrais, K. & LeCompte, M. (1995). *The way schools work: A sociological analysis of education*. Longman Publishing Group.
- Denyer, D., & Tranfield, D. (2009). *Producing a systematic review*. Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.
- DuBois, W. E. B. (1967). *The philadelphia negro: A social study*. Shoken Books New York.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1994/1903). *The souls of black folks*. New York Dover Publications.
- Ehrich, L. C. (2003). *The quest for meaning*. *Qualitative Educational Research in Action*, 42.

- Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students. Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.
- French, Patrice B. (2019). Culturally relevant practice frameworks and application in adult education. *Adult Education Research Conference*.
- Hammond, R. (2019). *How well do freshmen at flagships reflect the share of underrepresented minorities in their states?* Chronicle of Higher Education.
- Heidegger, M. (1927/2011). *Being and time*. Harper & Row.
- Hilton, J. T., & Jordan, J. (2021). The recruitment and retention of diverse students in honors: What the last twenty years of scholarship say. *National Collegiate Honors Council*.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of black children*. Jossey-Bass Publishing Co.
- Lemert, C. C. (2018). *Social theory: The multicultural, global, and classic readings* (Sixth edition.). Routledge.
- Lincoln, Y. S. (1990). Toward a categorical imperative for qualitative research. *Teachers College Press*.
- Longo, P., & Falconer, J. (2003). Diversity opportunities for higher education and honors programs: A view from Nebraska. *National Collegiate Honors Council*, 4(1), 53–61.
- Mead, A. (2018). Socioeconomic equity in honors education: Increasing numbers of first-generation and low-income students. *National Collegiate Honors Council*.
- Mertens, D. (2019). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (5th ed.). Sage publications.
- Meyer S. G. (2000). *As long as they don't move next door: Segregation and racial conflict in American neighborhoods*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Milner, H. R. (2012). But what is urban education? *Urban Education*, 47(3), 556–561.

- Morrow, S.L., & Smith, M.L. (2000). *Qualitative research methods in counseling psychology*. NY: Wiley.
- Napolitano, M., & Killinger, M. (2021). One singular sensation: Integrating personal narratives into the honors classroom. *National Collegiate Honors Council*.
- National Collegiate Honors Council. (2002). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* (1st ed., Vol. 3).
- National Collegiate Honors Council. (2003). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* (1st ed., Vol. 4).
- National Collegiate Honors Council. (2014–2015). *NCHC Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey Summary Table*. Retrieved from: <http://nchc.site-ym.com/general/custom.asp?page=Research>
- National Collegiate Honors Council. (2020). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* (1st ed., Vol. 21).
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pittman, A. A. (2004). Diversity issues & honors education. *National Collegiate Honors Council*.
- Radasanu, A., & Barker, G. (2021). The role of admissions practices in diversifying honors populations: A case study. *National Collegiate Honors Council*.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchchip/362/>
- Raisanen, E. (2023). Who belongs in honors? Culturally responsive advising and transformative diversity. *National Collegiate Honors Council*.
- Rapport, F., & Wainwright, P. (2006). Phenomenology as a paradigm of movement. *Nursing Inquiry*, 13(3), 228-236.

- Ravitch, S., & Carl, N. M. (2020). *Qualitative Research: Bridging the Conceptual, Theoretical, and Methodological*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Redford, J., & Hoyer, K. M. (2017). First-generation and continuing-generation college students: A comparison of high school and postsecondary experiences. (ED-IES-12-D-0002.) U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Rudestam, K., & Newton, R. (2015). *Surviving your dissertation: A comprehensive guide to content and process*. Sage Publications.
- Schutz, A. (1967). The phenomenology of the social world. *Northwestern University Press*.
- Scott, R. I., Smith, P. J., & Cognard-Black, A. J. (2017). Demography of honors: The census of U.S. honors programs and colleges. *National Collegiate Honors Council*.
- Singla, A. et al. (2023). Diversity in honors: Understanding systemic biases through student narratives. *National Collegiate Honors Council*.
- Stake, R. E. (2005). *Qualitative Case Studies*. Sage Publications.
- Ticknor, C. S., et al. (2019). Using possible selves and intersectionality theory to understand why students of color opt out of honors. *National Collegiate Honors Council*.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human Science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Wiggan, G. (2012). *Education in a strange land: Globalization, urbanization, and urban schools; the social and educational implications of the geopolitical economy*. New York: Nova Publishers.
- Wiggan, G., et al. (2020). *Critical race structuralism: The role of science education in teaching social justice issues in urban education and pre-service teacher education programs*. Urban Education (Beverly Hills, Calif.), vol. 58, no. 9, 2023, pp. 2209–38.

Wiggan, G., Teasdell, A., & Parsons, T. (2022). *Critical race structuralism and Charles Mills' racial contract: pedagogical practices for twenty-first-century educators. sociology of race and ethnicity*, 8(4), 456-463.

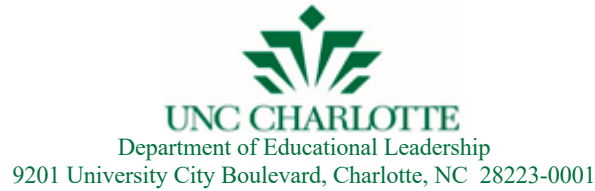
APPENDIX 1: REFLECTIVE STATEMENT

My role as an advisor and instructor in this space, along with my educational background and beliefs on equitable educational experiences for minority students prompted me to further explore notions of belonging for this demographic. Additionally, my experience as an overseer of all co-curricular service commitments among Honors scholars encouraged me to explore this topic. While research on opportunity gaps, such as enrollment and retention for minority students in Honors remains prevalent, research on the relationship between the traditionally/overwhelmingly White environment that is Honors undergraduate education and notions of belonging among its growing population of minority students is sparse. For this reason, I decided to examine the notions of belonging among minority Honors scholars and how their race, class, culture, and collection of educational experiences impact their conception and/or sense of belonging.

As the researcher for this study, I acknowledge that my experiences as an advisor in the Honors College contributed to the study focus and design. I also acknowledge that my role as an instructor in Honors influenced the research direction of this study. Although none of the participants in this study were ever enrolled in any section of my courses, I understand that the position of advisor/instructor is one of authority in an educational environment. Despite my proximity to these students and their plight in Honors, the main conjunction at which my experiences intersect with theirs can be found in my past. I know all too well the isolation and ostracization that otherness entails in a predominantly White learning environment. From pre-kindergarten to the eighth grade, I was educated in schools almost entirely comprised of White students. As an Honors student in k-12, I can safely declare that belonging was not a sensation that I felt much of, nor something I ever would have known to miss. Nonetheless, I will maintain

an objective stance and aim to ground my interpretation and analysis in the data and relevant literature.

APPENDIX 2: STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION



Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Title of the Project: Notions of Belonging Among Minority Honors Scholars
Principal Investigator: Jordan Z. Boyd, University of North Carolina, Charlotte
Co-investigator: Study Sponsor: N/A

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The information provided is to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Important Information You Need to Know

- This study will gain insight into notions of belonging among minority Honors scholars. This research is being conducted to provide insight into the impact of minority Honors students' race, class, culture, and educational experiences on their sense of belonging in these spaces.
- We are asking second-fourth year college students in the US who are currently enrolled in the University Honors Program at Charlotte, self-identify as LatinX (including Puerto Ricans), African American, Asian Pacific American, Arab, and other Middle Eastern American, Indigenous American, Native Hawaiian, Inuit, or Alaska Native, and are age 18 and older to participate in this study.
- All aspects of the study will take place online. The Student Demographics Questionnaire should take about 10-20 minutes to complete independently. The 60-minute Individual Interview will take place via Zoom. I will provide you with the necessary links to click on to access the interviews online.
- Some of the questions I'll ask you are personal and sensitive. For example, I'll ask you about the challenges you may have experienced in Honors thus far. These questions are personal and you might experience some mild emotional discomfort. You may choose to skip a question you do not want to answer. You will not personally benefit from taking part in this research, but the study results may extend research on how to raise the presence of cultural competence in Honors programming across America.
- Individual Interviews will occur via Zoom and will be recorded for transcription purposes. The recordings will be stored on a University device until the research study has reached full completion. At that time such recordings will be permanently deleted from the University's hard drive.
- Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you decide whether to participate in this research study.

Why are we doing this study?

The purpose of this study is to explore notions of belonging among minority Honors scholars specifically at the intersection of race, class, culture, and education.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are a second-fourth year college student in the US who is currently enrolled in the University Honors Program at Charlotte, self-identify as LatinX (including Puerto Ricans), African American, Asian Pacific American, Arab, and other Middle Eastern American, Indigenous American, Native Hawaiian, Inuit, or Alaska Native, and are age 18 and older to participate in this study.

What will happen if I take part in this study?

If you choose to participate in the study, you will participate in a 60-minute individual interview. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your current collegiate academic experience in Honors, your experiences from your high school honors courses, and your social experiences in Honors. Individual Interviews will occur via Zoom and will be recorded for transcription purposes. The recordings will be stored on a University device until the research study has reached full completion. At that time such recordings will be permanently deleted from the University hard drive.

What benefits might I experience?

You will not benefit directly from being in this study. Others might benefit because it is important to understand minority Honors scholars' notions of belonging in Honors in hopes of better establishing an environment of cultural relevance and responsiveness in Honors.

What risks might I experience?

The questions I'll ask you are personal and sensitive. For example, I'll ask you about the challenges you may have experienced in Honors thus far. These questions are personal and you might experience some mild emotional discomfort. You may choose to skip a question you do not want to answer. We do not expect this risk to be common and you may choose to skip questions you do not want to answer.

How will my information be protected?

Your privacy will be protected and confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible. Your responses will be treated as confidential and will not be linked to your identity. To protect your privacy (identity), we'll assign a study ID code to your questionnaire and transcribed interview responses. While the study is active, only the Principal Investigator will have routine access to the study data. Other people with approval from the Investigator, may need to see the information we collect about you. Including people who work for UNC Charlotte and other agencies as required by law or allowed by federal regulations. Data with any linking information will be deleted from the University hard drive at the conclusion of the study. Audio recordings from the individual interview will be deleted once transcriptions are verified by the Principal Investigator.

How will my information be used after the study is over?

After this study is complete, study data may be shared with other researchers for use in other studies without asking for your consent again or as may be needed as part of publishing our results. The data we share will NOT include information that could identify you.

Will I receive an incentive for taking part in this study?

An incentive is not able to be offered at this time.

What other choices do I have if I don't take part in this study?

If you choose not to participate, we will remove all of your collected responses from the data.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

It is up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Who can answer my questions about this study and my rights as a participant?

For questions about this research, you may contact Jordan Z. Boyd, at jboyd44@charlotte.edu or Dr. Greg Wiggan, the faculty advisor at gwiggan@uncc.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Office of Research Protections and Integrity at 704-687-1871 or uncc-irb@charlotte.edu.

Consent To Be Audio Recorded

With your permission, you will have the following done during this research (check all that apply):

_____ audio recording

To assist with the accurate recording of participant responses, assessment, and follow-up appointments may be audio recorded. Participants have the right to refuse to allow such recording without penalty. Please select one of the following options:

_____ I consent to the use of audio recordings for research purposes.

_____ I do not consent to the use of audio recordings for research purposes.

Consent to Participate

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will receive a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the Principal Investigator using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Name & Signature of the person obtaining consent

Date

Part 1: Demographic Information

1. What age group are you part of? (Group 1: 18 and Under, Group 2: 19 to 20; Group 3: 21 and above).
2. Gender: Please describe how you identify. [We ask for gender identity to adequately report the gender identities of participants in our study. However, this study does not aim to focus on one particular gender.]
3. What is your place of origin?
4. What racial group do you identify with? [Race here refers to the observable color of one's skin based on societal perceptions of skin color and racial identity i.e. Black, Brown, White, etc.]
5. How would you describe your ethnicity? [Ethnicity here refers to a person's ethnic background based on cultural attributes of their country of origin i.e. African American, Irish American, South African, etc.]
6. What is the highest degree or level of school that your guardian(s) completed? [Please report based on the guardians you had during high school years]
7. Is there any other important information you would like to report about your background?

Part 2: High School Academic History

8. Where did you attend high school?
9. What was the location of the high school you attended (city, state)?
10. What type of high school did you attend (e.g. public, private, magnet, etc.)?
11. What year did you graduate from high school?
12. Were you in Honors courses in high school?
13. How many Honors courses did you participate in while in high school?
14. What subject areas did you complete Honors coursework for while in high school?

Part 3: College Entrance Experience

15. What is the number of Honors Colleges you applied to for admission?
16. How many Honors College acceptances did you receive?

Part 4: Current Experience in Higher Education

17. What is your current year of study in the Honors College?
18. What is your current major?
19. What honors/recognitions have you received during your college experience thus far?
[Please write N/A if this does not apply]
20. How would you describe your overall college experience thus far?

APPENDIX 3: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What factors influence minority students' decision to join the Honors Program?
2. What aspects of being a minority contribute to minority students' notions of belonging in the Honors Program?
3. What elements of the Honors Program, in particular, contribute to minority students' sense of belonging in Honors?

Interview Briefing:

- Defines the situation for the subject: This is the individual interview portion of the study which is part 2 of the 3-part study. This segment will last approximately 60 minutes. Before we begin, I want to ask again: do I have your permission to record this interview?
- Purpose of the interview:
 - The purpose of this study is to explore notions of belonging among minority Honors scholars and how race, class, culture, and education act as influencers of belonging in Honors.
- Use of recording
- Ask if there are any questions
- Debriefing:
 - Ask participants, if there is any more to add.
 - Ask about the experience with the interview
 - Ask if there is anything else you want to share or add before we conclude.
 - How do minority Honors scholars define “honors”? (b) What does it mean to “belong” in Honors? (c) What role do parents, peers, educators, and community stakeholders play in establishing belonging? (d) What are some challenges/solutions experienced by minority Honors scholars? (e) How do minority Honors scholars describe the process that got them to their current point (what did the process look like/ how did it evolve)?

Next Steps:

- Following this interview, around the end of February, you will receive a letter of appreciation via email for your willing participation in this research project.

Part 1: Decision to Choose Honors

RQ1. What factors influence minority students' decision to join the Honors Program?

1. What made you decide to join the University Honors Program?
2. Was this a personal endeavor or did others influence this decision?
3. How do you feel about the decision to join the University Honors Program at this point?

Part 2: Being a Minority in Honors

RQ2. What aspects of being a minority contribute to minority students' notions of belonging in the Honors Program?

1. In what ways are you reminded of your race/ethnicity/social class in the Honors environment?
2. Has your race/ethnicity/social class ever presented itself as an issue in Honors? If so, how?
3. How have these experiences impacted your sense of belonging in Honors?

Part 3: Current Experiences in the Honors College

RQ3. What elements of the Honors Program, in particular, contribute to minority students' sense of belonging in Honors?

1. Can you describe in as much detail as possible your feelings about your Honors College experience?
2. Do you feel as though you belong in the Honors College? Why or why not?
3. Do you feel welcome in Honors?
4. What can be improved to establish a culture of belonging among minority Honors students?

APPENDIX 4: IRB APPROVAL

To: Jordan Boyd

Honors College

From: IRB

Approval Date: 15-Jan-2024

Expiration Date of Approval: No Date of Expiration - No End Date **RE:** Notice of IRB
Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)

Submission Type: Initial Application

Expedited Category: 6~7

Study #: IRB-24-0166

Study Title: Belonging in Honors: An In-Depth Analysis of Otherness in High-Achieving Undergraduate Programming

This submission has been approved by the IRB. It has been determined that the risk involved in this research is no more than minimal. The approval has no expiration or end date and is not subject to an annual continuing review. However, you are required to obtain approval for all changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented and to comply with the Investigator Responsibilities detailed below. This includes submitting a progress report (Administrative Check-In) at requested time points. Carefully review the Investigator Responsibilities listed below.

Your approved consent forms and other documents are available online at [Submission](#)

Page. Investigator's Responsibilities:

1. Amendments **must** be submitted for review and the amendment must be approved before implementing the amendment. This includes changes to study procedures, study materials, personnel, etc.
2. Researchers must adhere to all site-specific requirements mandated by the study site (e.g., face mask, access requirements and/or restrictions, etc.).
3. Data security procedures must follow procedures as approved in the protocol and in accordance with [OneIT Guidelines for Data Handling](#).
4. Promptly notify the IRB (uncc-irb@charlotte.edu) of any adverse events or unanticipated risks to participants or others.
5. Three years (3) following this approval/determination, you must complete the Admin-Check In form via Niner Research to provide a study status update.
- 6.

Be aware that this study is included in the Office of Research Protections and Integrity (ORPI) Post-Approval Monitoring program and may be selected for post-review monitoring at some point in the future.

7.

Reply to the ORPI post-review monitoring and administrative check-ins that will be conducted periodically to update ORPI as to the status of the study.

8. Complete the Closure eform via Niner Research once the study is complete.

Please be aware that approval may still be required from other relevant authorities or "gatekeepers" (e.g., school principals, facility directors, custodians of records).

This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 28 CFR 46 (DOJ), 21 CFR 50 and 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.