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Using Possible Selves and Intersectionality Theory to Understand Why Students of Color Opt Out of Honors

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Abstract: Honors education values diversity, not simply to enrich our classrooms but for equity and social justice. At Columbus State University, students of color were underrepresented in honors education, and we sought to determine if institutional structures hindered them from being able to access educational programming that was commensurate with their ability. We used focus group interviews with students of color who were academically eligible to enroll in honors education yet never participated. We combined focus group interviews with an analysis of our recruiting practices. Using a theoretical framework based on intersectionality and possible selves theory, we found that our participants valued diverse learning environments, balance, and co-curricular engagement that supported their professional, hoped-for selves. However, they perceived honors students as stressed, studious, and lacking leisure time, and they perceived honors education as disconnected from their future professional selves. Since their perceptions, which were informed by participation in advanced programs in middle school and high school, as well as our recruiting practices, were in conflict with their educational aims, our participants were unwilling to invest in honors education. While not generalizable, the results provide unique insights that may implicate institutional practices as barriers to participation because they fail to address the concerns of high-achieving students of color.

Keywords: diversity in honors education; honors recruitment; scholar identity; institutional barriers; high-achieving students of color

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Across the nation, honors programs and colleges often demonstrate an intentional commitment to developing and supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion both in and outside the classroom. While diversity is valuable to institutions of higher education, the benefit to honors programs is even more significant. Since honors education emphasizes small classes and discussion-based instruction, representation of the full range of social and economic perspectives is essential to effective learning. This fullness in perspectives not only promotes creative thinking but expands honors students' capacity for viewing issues or problems from multiple perspectives, angles, and vantage points. Absorbing and navigating diverse vantage points work to honors students' advantage when they encounter unique challenges in a variety of contexts, not only in their classrooms but also in their careers and personal lives. Rather than viewing the world through a single-focus lens, honors students can expand their views and consider multiple options when making decisions and weighing issues of morality and ethics. Ultimately, students acquire the ability to build rich relationships with people from backgrounds different from their own, an essential soft skill that is valued in the workplace and enables deeper engagement in our local, state-wide, national, and global communities.

The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) has promoted diversity in programs that serve high-ability students by providing strategies to create supportive and enriching educational environments (see the monograph *Setting the Table for Diversity* edited by Coleman & Kotinek, 2010). These efforts notwithstanding, honors programs often struggle to attract and retain racially and socioeconomically diverse students. For example, in a 2018 survey comparing honors and non-honors participation at public research institutions, the proportion of black students participating in honors (2.36%) was roughly half of the proportion of non-honors students (4.51%), and the proportion of Hispanic students was also lower with 5.19% participating in honors compared to 8.98% of non-honors students (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019). The lack of racial diversity observed in the Columbus State University Honors College encouraged us to examine our recruiting practices. In particular, we wondered if our recruiting efforts were reaching high-ability students of color. If they were, then several questions arose: Was there a disconnect between what we promoted as benefits of participating in honors and what the students valued? Did institutional structures exist that caused inequities? Why did students of color not see honors education as a good fit for them? Why did they opt out?

To explore these questions, we conducted focus groups with high-achieving students of color who did not participate in honors education at our institution. We discovered a complex disconnect between our recruitment efforts and the identity concerns of our focus group participants that may or may not be unique to our institutional context.

INSTITUTIONAL AND HONORS CONTEXT

Columbus State University (CSU) is an “open access” institution for students who live within a 50-mile radius of our campus. Our primarily undergraduate university currently enrolls about 6,800 undergraduates and 8,400 students overall. With pride, CSU promotes our campus as one of the most diverse institutions in the southeast with respect to racial diversity. With 60% female, 49.5% non-Caucasian, and 31% first-generation students, our institution’s largest minority group identifies as black or African American. In addition, over 80% of CSU students live off-campus. Our institutional strategic plan strives to serve this diverse population and promote high-impact practices that are inspired by the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U’s) Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) Initiative (AAC&U, 2011). In particular, our institution promotes first-year experiences, international education, servant leadership, and undergraduate research.

Within this context, the CSU Honors College enrollment ranges between approximately 3.5–4.0% of undergraduate enrollment and meets the national recommendations set by the NCHC for well-established honors programs and colleges. Approximately two-thirds of all students enter as new freshmen, with over 50% coming to CSU from outside our region. All students must apply to the CSU Honors College for admission. We admit entering first-year students who have earned at least a 3.5 GPA in high school and at least a 26 on the ACT composite score or equivalent standardized test scores. We also admit current undergraduates who have a cumulative grade point average of 3.4 or above and are recommended by at least one faculty member. The demographic makeup of students enrolled in the honors college was relatively stable from 2012 to 2017, with the majority of our students describing themselves as white females, which is strikingly disproportionate to CSU’s undergraduates. In fall 2017, the honors college enrollment was 68% female compared to 59% for CSU as a whole, 76% White compared to 50%, 14% Black compared to 38%, and 5% Latino compared to 6%. The significant underrepresentation of students of color was the inspiration for our research as we sought

to understand why eligible CSU undergraduates were opting out of participating in the honors college. Marshalling the expertise of the CSU Honors College, the Office of Diversity Services, and the Department of Counseling, Educational Foundations, and Leadership, our collaborative effort began by considering the college's recruiting practices and articulating a theoretical framework that would support our exploration of the phenomenon.

Recruiting Practices Based on Motives Research

First-year honors student recruitment responsibilities are primarily housed in CSU's Office of Recruitment, but our honors college provides recruitment materials and conducts targeted email campaigns to lists provided by our institution. The honors college is solely responsible for its recruitment, and we use biannual (spring and fall) email campaigns to invite qualified undergraduates to apply if they have earned between fifteen and sixty semester credit hours.

In designing our recruitment materials, we used existing research on motives for participating in honors education. Most studies collected data from current or prospective honors students. For example, Rhea and Goodwin (2014) were interested in incorporating high school students' perceptions of honors education as they developed new honors programming to attract incoming first-year students. They conducted a series of three focus groups with eleven prospective honors students from their regional high schools, with eight of the participants being African American and two Latinx. During one meeting, they found that the "participants value an enriched learning experience more than a potential scholarship as a reason to join an honors program" (Rhea & Goodwin, 2014, p. 115). Seven of the eleven participants mentioned immersive learning while another three focused on close faculty relationships or mentoring. During other meetings, students were given a list of honors components and asked to identify the most important for them; they were attracted to study abroad, leadership development, and volunteer opportunities.

In another study, Hill (2005) used the recruitment and admission practices at his large mid-western institution to strategically collect data on student motives. He analyzed essays on 735 admissions and scholarship applications to examine what top high school students valued in honors education. (Unfortunately, a demographic breakdown of the respondents was not provided.) Students were asked to consider both advanced placement and honors courses at their schools. The most prevalent theme, included in

over half of the essays, was the challenging nature of the courses. Overall, the themes Hill identified included:

- Challenging students to meet higher expectations
- Working with students with the same level and speed of learning
- Learning in a different way and in more depth
- Receiving positive peer pressure due to similar goals
- Preparing for college (AP only)
- More interaction with teachers/professors
- Smaller class sizes
- Enhanced career success

Nichols and Chang (2013) surveyed current students enrolled in their honors college (96% of the 138 respondents were White) to study the factors that affected their initial decisions to enroll in honors education and their decisions to persist in honors. They asked applicants and current students in their honors college to rate factors using a five-point Likert scale. The factors that were ranked as having the strongest influence on initial decisions to join the honors college included getting a competitive advantage, small class sizes, the prestige of being part of the college, and developing faculty connections. Prestige and faculty connections were also very influential in decisions to persist in honors, along with the quality of the classes or learning environment and access to priority registration.

Using a sample of Dutch students, Wolfensberger and Offringa (2012) found the quality of the learning environment was a strong motive for pursuing honors education. As part of a more extensive study comparing European honors and non-honors students, the researchers asked current honors students why they participated in honors education. Their results indicated that honors students are more motivated than non-honors students by intrinsic interests, such as being intellectually challenged, and less likely to be concerned about extrinsic motives, such as career goals, than their non-honors counterparts. Additionally, honors students were more likely than their non-honors peers to interact with faculty and expect more profound learning experiences.

Using these findings, CSU's honors college developed recruitment language that emphasized the following themes: our honors curriculum would challenge the way students thought about the world; the size of honors

classes would enable students to know their professors and work closely with like-minded honors students; and the honors diploma seal is prestigious and worthy of pursuit. Although this strategy attracted between 250 and 300 students per year (3–4% of the CSU undergraduate enrollment) to apply for the honors college, the applications were primarily from white females (~70%). The number of applications from students of color and males were persistently low, which is consistent with national trends (Cognard-Black, Smith, & Dove, 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To address the lack of racial diversity, we sought to critically examine our current recruiting practices in order to understand why they were not appealing to students of color (i.e., Latinx and African American students), intending to understand particular rationales offered for not participating in the honors program. We did not assume that the reasoning of students of color would be unidimensional or that all students of color would have the same background and experiences. Instead, we anticipated multidimensionality. However, we did conjecture that the lack of uptake in honors might be related to identity, with eligible students of color questioning to what degree participation might influence who they were in the moment and whom they could become. Therefore, we chose to use the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and possible selves to support our critical analysis.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality originates with black feminist theorists and posits that various identities (e.g., race, gender, social and economic status, and academic identity) intersect and interact in more than an additive nexus to situate development (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1989; Cole, 2009; Santos & Toomey, 2018) and likewise influence how an individual makes meaning of experiences (Strayhorn, 2017). Intersectionality has proven fruitful across a variety of disciplines in contextualizing how inequality is not only socially embedded but also differentially experienced (Chan et al., 2019; Severs et al., 2016). Intersectionality acknowledges that identity is understood and experienced within a myriad of contexts, including family background, socio-cultural conditions, current experiences, career decisions, and life planning. This context plays a role in the fluidity and salience of identity to the core sense of self (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000). In other words, the core

sense of self (personal attributes, characteristics, and identity) is surrounded by dimensions of identification such as race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and religion (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Later theorists of intersectionality also introduced the concept of a meaning-making filter. An individual with a more complex, “foundational” meaning-making filter is less influenced by contextual influences, such as peers, family, norms, and stereotypes, than an individual with less complex “transitional” or “formulaic” meaning-making capacity (Abes et al., 2007). Thus, to understand why students of color opt out of honors, intersectionality allows us to better examine the complex and varied experiences of our participants within our institutional context and how these experiences influence their choices.

Possible Selves Theory

The choices one makes are also based on options that the individual perceives are available or possible (Kao, 2000; Oyserman, 2015). Markus and Nurius (1986) defined possible selves as those that one hopes for, fears, and expects; they are part of an individual’s self-concept that is oriented toward the future. Possible selves are both supported by and influence a sense of self in the moment or current self-concept. The selves one can potentially envision are infinite (Markus & Nurius, 1986). However, researchers investigating possible selves have explored the degree to which they are porous to the perceived possibilities within a given environment (e.g., Frazier, 2012; Kao, 2000; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). This environment encompasses the social roles we take on and the social identities with which we align ourselves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). Researchers exploring the academic impact of possible selves for students of color suggest that viewing themselves as academically successful is a prerequisite for possible academic selves, serving a self-regulatory function (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Oyserman, Johnson, & James, 2011). Self-regulation in this framework develops in the context of both a hoped-for self and a feared self (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). For example, a person is more likely to study if he or she is emotionally invested in both a hoped-for self that passes a vital course and a feared self that fails the important course.

Further, possible selves are congruent with social identity (Oyserman & James, 2009), and students must implement plausible strategies that can lead them on a path to their future goals (Oyserman et al., 2011). Students also need opportunities to be developed as well as the willingness to participate in their development (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011; Frazier,

Cross, & Cross, 2015); identification of self as “unlike”—not fitting into the perceived image of an honors student—could discourage participation in honors education (Oyserman, 2015).

Using intersectionality and possible selves together as a framing device allowed us to examine individual identities from multiple dimensions, including how individuals can be constrained or privileged by social and institutional structures and how social and institutional structures are implicated in influencing what students hope for or fear in the course of completing their disciplinary preparation. We believe it is critical to understand the overlapping intersections of our participants’ backgrounds and experiences as well as their aspirations and fears for the future if we are to understand better why qualified students of color opt out of honors education.

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

To address our research aims, we conducted three one-hour, semi-structured focus group interviews with five to seven students who were eligible to apply for the honors college and identified as an underrepresented race or ethnicity. Focus group research allows for flexible and efficient data collection when the goals are to understand the social dimensions of issues and policies as well as to elicit collective views (Ryan, Gandha, Culbertson, & Carlson, 2014). The focus group interview format also relies on participant interactions with one another and the moderators. Since the moderators included three women of color (an undergraduate honors student who worked as a peer educator in the Office of Diversity, the director of the Office of Diversity, and a professor) and the white female dean of the honors college, we planned our interactions to be neutral when participants expressed their thoughts and perceptions about their experiences. However, if they asked specific questions about our honors curriculum, programming, and services, we would provide that information. The moderators’ role was to facilitate the conversation and ensure that the voices of all participants were represented in the data.

We targeted students of color who were qualified for honors education but never applied to the honors college. We framed our questions in the context of literature pertaining to possible selves theory, intersectionality theory, and prior studies on motives for participating in honors education. Our primary research questions were:

- What about our recruitment strategy was ineffective in attracting them? (e.g., Were they aware of the Honors College? Had they been

contacted? What aspects of our recruitment language were or were not appealing?)

- What prior experiences (educational and personal) may have influenced their perceptions of honors education?
- How did they perceive the honors college and its students? How did these perceptions align or not align with their self-images?

Our objective was to learn about each individual's experiences and perceptions as well as the development of these perceptions and to observe any collective opinions that developed during the discussion.

Participants and Focus Group Procedures

Though a nascent area of inquiry, studies aimed at exploring/managing the complexity of articulating intersectionality involve several practices that are common or recommended (McCall, 2005). Choo and Feree (2010) argue that researchers have devised methodologies and/or analyses that are group-centered, process-centered, or system-centered, noting that group-centered approaches employ sampling procedures that bring forward and then center marginalized voices and perspectives; process-centered and system-centered studies explore interrelationships as well as "intersectionality as a complex system" (p. 135).

We used a group-centered approach to our study design by recruiting seventeen undergraduate students of color. These students were qualified to participate in honors but never applied to the honors college. After receiving approval for human subjects research by our Institutional Review Board, we conducted three one-hour focus group interviews with our participants. Three of the participants were males, two of whom were classified in university records as first generation. All the males self-reported their race/ethnicity as black or African American. The fourteen females included one international Hispanic student, one student who self-identified as more than one race, and twelve who self-reported as black or African American. Three female students were classified as first-generation college students, and three were non-traditionally aged students. The participants' average grade point average at Columbus State University was 3.59. The group averaged 63 semester credit hours, with 29% classified as sophomores, 35% as juniors, and 35% as seniors.

During the focus group interviews, one of the four researchers acted as the lead moderator who asked the primary question while the remaining researchers asked clarifying or follow-up questions. During each focus group,

participants were first asked to confirm their demographic information, including first-generation status, nontraditional status, and major course of study. Next, they were asked to describe their past participation and experiences with honors-level K–12 education. Next came discussion of their familiarity with honors education at our institution, including their sources of information about honors education and their perceptions of honors students and honors education. Finally, we asked the participants to react to a list of resources or benefits provided by the honors college to determine if any were appealing or unappealing. As opportunities in the discussion arose, we probed deeper to understand why, if they were aware of the opportunity to participate in honors, they had opted out. All focus groups were video recorded and then transcribed and anonymized using pseudonyms (e.g., Betty) and also annotated to document visual cues (e.g., nodding in agreement) and non-verbal communication (e.g., laughing) before being destroyed to protect the participants' confidentiality.

Data Analysis

We used a basic interpretive approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Percy et al., 2015) to data analysis when examining the verbal content but acknowledged participant interactions (verbal and non-verbal) that appeared to form collective opinions. After the interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were loaded into Dedoose, an online coding platform that facilitated the analysis by our team of researchers. During the first round of analysis, each researcher independently analyzed the transcripts using an inductive approach, which does not impose a structure or pattern to the data but allows themes to emerge through multiple readings of the text. During independent readings, each researcher created category labels and developed definitions of those categories by reviewing the associated excerpts from the data that illustrated each category. After the first review of the data was complete, the research team met and refined our category labels into codes, which we used to reread and code the interviews. During this phase of analysis, each member of the research team reviewed two of the three interview sessions, allowing for multiple reviews to improve the validity of our findings. After the coding process, we reviewed the codes and data to develop a richer sense of overarching themes and linkages between our participants' experiences and their perceptions. We noted any possible relationships between the codes as well as between our codes and our theoretical framework and background literature. This process was how we discerned themes from the data. Team discussions

of themes and linkages were supported by reexamining excerpts from the transcript to confirm any conjectures developed during the analysis.

RESULTS

In general, most of our traditional-aged participants were aware of the honors college and/or recalled being contacted with our electronic invitation to apply. However, several nontraditional student participants indicated that they were not familiar with the honors college or felt that they would not be eligible to participate. In addition, our participants communicated concerns about investing time, money, and energy into an endeavor that they might not find valuable. Their perceptions of honors education and of those who participate in honors education contrasted with what they valued. Our participants rarely discussed race and gender differences, so before we can discuss any emergent theme potentially linked to race, gender or age, a more thorough discussion of each theme is needed.

Scholar Identity Barriers

One of the predominant themes that emerged from the data was a perceived mismatch between the personal scholar identities of the participants and the scholar identities of students in the honors college. Our subjects' images of honors students contrasted with the type of students they hoped to be. When we asked them to describe what an honors student at the university looked like, they responded with phrases such as "studying all the time," "not part of the social crowd," "[spending] too much time studying," and "mainly studying, constantly studying, no life." They perceived honors students as highly intelligent but socially disconnected and in general that lifestyle did not appeal to them, as expressed by Maria, a traditional Latinx female: "They're really like focused on their studies, and that's not for me." Other students perceived this lifestyle as a barrier to social goals. For example, George—a traditional, first-generation, black male—explained why he opted out of honors by noting, "I wouldn't have any social life at all."

The Value of Balance

The perception that students who participate in honors have a limited social life contrasted with the balanced lifestyle that participants highly valued, a lifestyle that included both work and enjoyment, effort and relaxation. Participants perceived honors students at CSU as focused on work and effort

at the expense of leisure and relaxation. As Cathy, a nontraditional black female, explained, “You want to be able to manage, you know, what classes you’re taking, but you want to have a little bit of relaxation time. You know, um, what is that saying, ‘all work, no fun’? Debby, a traditional black female, expanded on Cathy’s comments as three other participants nodded their heads in agreement: “We want to be able to do good work but also enjoy what you’re doing.” The participants said that participating in honors would be a barrier to their participating in sports, relaxing, focusing on their majors, “hanging out with friends,” or doing things they enjoyed.

In one of the focus groups, we probed deeper into comments that seemed to indicate that the subjects perceived a distinct separation between their social life and study life. When we asked if the participants socialized with their study partners, most said they did not. It was unclear whether either their social circles or study groups were racially homogeneous or if race contributed to this social separation. Consider three traditional black females—Joan, Hannah and Faith—who had a rich discussion in one focus group. Joan explained, “I think our only thing in common [between me and my study partners] is our degree, and everything else is not common. . . . I think it’s a different world, who you study with, and who you actually hang out with.” Hannah supported Joan’s comment: “A couple people I should say, that I consistently study with, but we’re not, we wouldn’t ever hang out.” Faith agreed with Hannah by adding, “We use each other as resources in order to succeed in our class . . . we are very close with one another, but in a different way.”

However, this separation of social and study life was not consistent for all participants. For example, George offered a different perspective from the women in the group:

It’s kind of the opposite for me, I found that through the, my peers in the classroom, that we had mutual interests that expand beyond the classroom, and that makes us friends, and also, because we’re the same major, we have the same classes almost every semester so it’s like we’re gonna be together for a while, so we should get to know each other pretty well.

George explained that while he worked out with or socialized with some classmates, his social group was not limited to peers in his major and did not include all his classmates. While he did not compartmentalize his friendships and classmates as his peers did, he stressed the importance of engaging in a balanced lifestyle and described how working out, relaxing, or watching movies allowed him to rejuvenate and focus on his academics.

Collectively, all the participants hoped for a balanced lifestyle that allowed them to have time for relaxation and recreation, and they appeared fearful that if they participated in honors, they would only study all the time. Some participants had distinctly separate social circles for studying and recreation, which may be additional evidence that they perceived honors students as nonsocial beings. The participants were neither anti-intellectual nor concerned about the social stigma associated with participation in the honors college. When asked to describe what honors students look like, only one nontraditional student shyly confessed that the first thing she thought of was “nerds,” but a traditional student counterpart disagreed. Debby countered, “You think of people who are like presidents of organizations, president of SGA.” Our participants seemed to appreciate honors students’ hard work, but in their view, honors students were imbalanced in a way that was at odds with participants’ identities as scholars or with their expected/hoped-for self as a well-educated, well-balanced student. Logically, if our participants viewed honors students as leading imbalanced and unsocial lives, then they would find it unappealing to join a college that advertised the benefit of a community of “like-minded” peers.

The Value of Diversity

In addition to valuing a balanced lifestyle, our participants expressed appreciation for the diverse backgrounds of students in their classes. Comments contributing to this theme naturally arose when we asked participants about the appeal of different benefits of joining the honors college, which included working with “like-minded” peers. Sometimes the notion was appealing. For example, Ron, first-generation black male, could see the advantages of studying with honors students because they would be good at education. He described honors students as “a group of people you can lean on and understand you as well.” Cathy led a discussion with two others in her focus group about the merits of working with “like-minded people” on assigned group projects and her appreciation of working with others who would actually do the work.

However, other students saw some disadvantages to working with similarly driven students. For example, George argued, “With the honors, it could be like, if there are a lot of like-minded people that are like, full of themselves, they could be really competitive.” Hannah and Joan nodded in agreement with George. Some participants preferred to focus on the importance of working with students from diverse backgrounds, which they

defined in the context of race, age, and academic preparation. The students also valued being in communities where the members differed in intellectual predilections, with the importance of diversity interwoven throughout the focus groups. As Joan succinctly stated, “I think you can learn something from everybody.” Ron explained, “This campus is super diverse. I’m talking about as far as, like, different levels of thinking, different strengths, and weaknesses academically.” Ron said that he went to college to meet and learn from “all kinds of people,” which was echoed in George’s comments about diverse classrooms: “It also gives the opportunity to try to show off things and teach other people things, too.”

When asked to describe honors students, Nancy said: “They look like me; they look like her; they look like him [pointing to others in the focus group].” However, three students characterized honors students as primarily white. Betty, a first-generation female who identified as two or more races, developed her perceptions based on her prior experience with honors in K–12 education. She said, “Maybe I was like the only person who was black female in my class, and that would be uncomfortable for me from 5th grade until like senior level, I was like, well, I’m all by myself in these type of classes.” She indicated that the experience influenced her when deciding whether to participate in honors. Hannah, a traditional black female in a separate focus group, had a similar experience and assumed that few students of color were in the honors college, stating, “I typically, to be honest, I thought it was a majority whites and I kind of think that happens from elementary all the way up.” Joan agreed with Hannah: “I think that it’s majority white,” but her rationale was different: “Because they could afford the extra classes.” Overall, our students valued diversity and assumed that the honors college was not intellectually or racially diverse.

The two subthemes of valuing balance and diversity paint an image of what our participants hoped to be: students who were successful in coursework, enjoyed being a college student in a diverse classroom, and had enough time to pursue a well-balanced social life. This ideal stood in contrast to their perception of honors students as successful but intensely focused on their studies at the expense of other lifestyle concerns. This concept of what it meant to be an honors student appeared to be a significant barrier to participation in honors.

The Roots of Perceived Scholar Identity Barriers

Many of the students appeared to rely on their K–12 experiences with honors—e.g., AP or IB courses; honors courses; gifted education—to situate

their perceptions of a CSU honors student's social life. While not all the participants had prior experience with honors, those who did described these K–12 classrooms as calmer and more serious, fast-paced, rigorous, and stressful. The stress primarily came from honors courses requiring more time and effort to do extra work. Keith, a traditional black male, painted this tension-filled picture:

We would have to do these practice AP exams, and you could just feel how much more stressed people were that day. We would have to stop the exam to go to lunch during the exam, and nobody talked at lunch, or anybody barely talked, everybody was just focused.

George indicated that, in an honors classroom, the faster pace seemed to imply that teachers expected everyone to understand the content the first time it was presented. He recalled a teacher chastising her students with “You should’ve known this already!” and contrasted this expectation with the pedagogical practice in “regular” classrooms where content was explained multiple times in multiple ways, allowing for plenty of opportunities to learn the material. The participants described regular classrooms as more relaxed in terms of both the pace of the content and the social environment. Michelle, a traditional black female, described her experience when she was enrolled in both honors and non-honors courses in high school:

I like taking regular classes with honors classes just because then you won't have that pressure on you all day all the time and you can get a mix of your friends who aren't in the honors or AP classes, instead of just being in this class, and you have to do your work and don't play don't talk, do your work, so, I liked it. Just the difference in being able to experience both things

The social pressure to perform well and do extra work appeared to lead to what several described as being “burnt out.” For example, Betty described honors as “like four years of running a race, so I just wanted a break.” Others explained that they just wanted to be a “regular” student when they came to the university. Their prior experiences with honors education in K–12 echoed their descriptions of the driven, studious honors students who did not have a social life even though the pressure and stress of pursuing honors in K–12 was sometimes self-imposed. For example, one student indicated that he felt the pressure from being a role model and needing to live up to the expectations of the ideal student.

Several students argued that the intensity of the K–12 preparation had not paid off for them. For example, Ron indicated that participation in advanced programming in high school had not defrayed college costs in the way he had hoped for or been promised:

For me, I don't think it was worth it because when I graduated like top 5% of my classes, I applied to like over 100 scholarships and I had good test scores, I received one scholarship so I mean this helped my decision to come to Columbus State because I had to stay in-state. I got accepted over 50 schools because I was applying everywhere because we had an unlimited fee waiver, so I had all these, and it came down to, and I got "this and this and this," and I wasn't a finalist for the scholarships, I mean I didn't get any of them, and I was applying, applying, applying while I'm working and taking AP credits and I'm like, it, to me, it's not worth it. . . .

Relevance to Professional Identity

The participants seemed keenly invested in their future careers and were attracted to experiences that could help them move forward toward possible future selves engaged in these careers. They were more than willing to invest their time and energy to participate in academic, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities that provided the knowledge or skills they felt would be necessary for success in their future careers. For example, they deemed mentoring resources offered by the honors college to be beneficial only when they helped students become more prepared for the future. Participants bemoaned faculty members who seemed more interested in preparing them for graduate work than the current job market and eloquently embraced challenging curricula, but only to the degree it facilitated preparation for the future:

I want to know I'm in college because I not only want to make decent grades, I want to learn things. I want to learn how the world works. How do I'm an early childhood education, I want to learn how do children learn. And it's, I feel like sometimes we're just doing the busy work just to get the grade? You know, look at the grade, I got these grades. Well, okay, you might have those grades, but do you really know what the heart or the content entails? How were you going to use this in your everyday life? In your job? How are you going to process with that knowledge? That's my issue. I don't want to be in a course because I'm in honors, so I want to get these grades. I want to

be in that course because I want to learn and this stuff I can use for many, many years once I finish college.

Many participants also expressed the practical concern of having enough money to complete the chosen degree. The students engaged in cost/benefits analysis when identifying academic experiences worthy of their involvement but incurring additional expenses; they were reluctant to participate in co-curricular options that seemed “nonessential” or unnecessary experiences that resulted in extra costs. For example, several students struggled to understand the need to take courses not linked to their majors. Thus, if honors was associated with nonessential coursework, participants deemed the program wasteful and to be avoided: “Um, well, like Faith and Hannah said, I had heard, word of mouth, that it was just extra classes and then like Faith said, those classes didn’t exactly line up with the nursing track, so I was like, why take the extra classes, especially if I’m gonna end up paying for them.” For these students, honors education was not essential or relevant, therefore not worthy of the investment of time and/or money.

In the final portion of our interview, we provided a list of benefits that students might receive if they joined the honors college, a list we used in prior advertising. We asked the students to indicate if each item was beneficial or a “turn off.” Our participants were fairly consistent in their responses, echoing their desire to add educational opportunities that were relevant to their professional identity. For example in responding to “Challenging classes that challenge the way you think about the world,” many were cautious about the word “challenging,” and some students worried that “challenging,” if well-defined, might mean extra work not worthy of their investment; however, if honors courses challenged their perspectives, they might be appealing. Ron provided this succinct response: “Beneficial if it is related to my major. But if it’s not, then not beneficial.”

The participants viewed internships and enhancing career goals as beneficial but not unique to honors education. The unique honors benefit of prestige or recognition for academic success evoked skepticism or neutrality. Nancy explained, “It could possibly be something that you put on a resume, so . . .” [others nod slightly in agreement]. In another group, George described prestige and recognition as “beneficial but not necessary.” Betty directly captured the nonessential nature of the seeming benefits of honors to a burgeoning professional identity:

I thought about it [honors] as being like nonessential, right? Because I’m a communication major with a focus in PR [public relations]

so even if I do get in the honors program, I don't know how that's gonna help me get a job in communication. Because that field is all creativity, which I feel like you could have in honors but, I just always thought about it as the extra-curricular work as being something that I didn't need.

DISCUSSION

Our study has provided some compelling evidence why typical approaches to recruiting honors students might not be appealing to students of color at CSU. Many of the students we interviewed were not persuaded by arguments that honors college participation was prestigious. Likewise, perks like participation in study abroad, leadership development, small classes, and more impactful work with faculty did not seem unique to the honors college experience at CSU. Given their perception of honors students and classrooms as overly intense, learning alongside such peers and in such environments was not appealing.

Instead, the students in our interviews showed us that they sought a scholar identity that encompassed passionate pursuit of their education while also privileging rich relationships with people different from them and interests not solely focused on academics. A number of our students who were also participants in advanced curricular options in their K–12 education did not see many students who manifested this type of balance. The students who spoke negatively of these experiences did not seem to have had this sort of balance themselves before reaching our institution. Instead, several argued that they and others in advanced K–12 classes were stressed. Likewise, some students noted that teachers who led advanced K–12 courses would proceed as if a once-through on difficult ideas was sufficient and seemed not to appreciate the diversity in learning among students who could handle more rigorous or challenging content. Students sought a life of balance rather than burnout in pursuing a college degree, so recruitment materials that spoke to challenging students and working with like-minded peers were turn-offs for students considering involvement in honors.

Also, and in contrast with prior research showing that honors participants were not as driven by career goals (Wolfensberger & Offringa, 2012), the honors-qualified students in our study were not only heavily invested in their future careers but were also seeking to avoid involvement in wasteful or non-essential expenses or classroom experiences. Our interviewees being highly conscious of the cost of college, they were more than willing to take part in

extracurricular or co-curricular activities only if they saw them as value-added to their preparation for the future. Further, when students believed participation in honors might make attaining high grades more difficult or when they saw honors as divorced from their future selves in their careers, they did not consider it worth the time, effort, and tuition dollars they might invest.

If participation in honors is perceived as extra work that has little meaning to the student, or if the perceived academic environment does not meet the student's values or needs, then students instead pursue other choices that are better aligned. We have learned that it is critical to stress that honors experiences are relevant and add value to career preparation when seeking to recruit students of color into honors programming. In essence, we have learned that we need to show prospective students that participation in honors is a proximal subgoal that is instrumental in achieving their future career goals (Miller & Brickman, 2004).

What we learned about our participants' perceptions may apply to many other students who choose not to participate in honors education and warrants more investigation to better understand why and how gender and race may or may not intersect with scholar identities. While we recognized the variety of experiences that contributed to the formation of our participants' perceptions about honors, our limited data provoked a number of questions. For example, when Betty and Hannah recalled that there were only white students in their honors courses and Joan described her study partners being in "a different world" than her social circle, we questioned to what extent their racial identity influenced their ability to identify and participate as honors students. Racial identity can be characterized by *centrality* (how central it is to one's sense of self), *private regard* (how individuals regard their race), or *sense of belonging* (Sellers et al. 1998; Chavous, 2000; Butler-Barnes et al., 2018). Positive racial identity characterized by high levels of centrality, positive private regard, and a strong sense of belonging have all been linked to improved academic resilience and success of black females (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018; Chambers, 2011; Evans-Winters, 2014). While these studies have demonstrated that strong racial identity can be a protective factor in hostile school climates and is associated with a greater sense of independence, their results elicit the question of whether possessing a strong racial identity lessens the need to belong to an honors community.

This question may, in part, be addressed by considering the gendered nature of racial-ethnic identity (REI) in school settings. For example, in studying REI in adolescent youths, Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry (2003) found that

gendered REI had a differential impact on school involvement. African American females who emphasized embedded achievement, which is the belief that achievement is part of being a good group member and if one succeeds the entire group succeeds (p. 309), were more likely to have greater academic achievement. In contrast, school involvement seems more important to African American young men when their REI emphasized connectedness, perhaps because they focus on “action, struggle, and survival” (Oyserman, Gant, Ager, 1995, p. 1220) and privilege autonomy when conceptualizing REI. However, a predominant focus on autonomy could lead to “rootlessness” and academic disengagement (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2003).

The need for connectedness among African American adolescent males is symmetrical to studies (Hall, 2017; Harrison, Martin, & Fuller, 2015) seeking to identify factors that lead to academic success for African American and Latinx undergraduate males; of note was not only the predominance of the microaggressions the young men experienced but the desire to translate these microaggressions into motivation to succeed or self-determination, underscoring “action, struggle and survival.” Microaggressions are barriers to engagement because they highlight how one does not belong, so one linchpin to academic success for African American and Latinx males is facilitating a sense of belonging (Hall, 2017; Harrison, Martin, & Fuller, 2015), a finding that is mirrored in Ron’s and George’s eloquent arguments not only for the importance of diverse classrooms but also of finding inspiration in working with other like-minded students. The young men’s articulate arguments about the importance of peers in sustaining engagement with academics stands somewhat in contrast to some of the young women in our study. More studies are needed to understand this difference, particularly as it relates to engagement in honors academic experiences.

Our limited sample of nontraditional students evoked more questions. Studies have shown that nontraditional students are likely to be more intrinsically motivated than traditional students and also more likely to underestimate their abilities (Bye et al., 2007; Taylor & House, 2010). According to our data, nontraditional students were less likely to have heard about the honors college and in at least one case more likely to assume ineligibility, but their motives did not appear to differ from their traditional counterparts. While we have a rich sense of our participants’ perceptions of the value of honors education, studies are needed to understand how the intersections of racial, gender, and nontraditional identities affect participation in honors education.

CONCLUSION

Although institutions of higher education seem genuinely invested in honors education, with an estimated 59% of U.S. traditional, undergraduate, not-for-profit institutions providing some form of honors curriculum (Scott & Smith, 2016), barriers may exist within these institutions that prevent full uptake of this opportunity. By approaching students of color with the assumption that they would speak multidimensionally about who they were or wanted to become, we identified barriers to engagement at our institution that were situated within our presumptions about the attractiveness of honors. In particular, our institutional recruitment practices and messaging created a barrier for students of color and potentially prevented them from taking up the opportunity to participate in honors. We also have not been as effective in meeting our students where they are as we need to be, especially in our sensitivity to those students who have developed negative perceptions of honors education during K–12 education. Also, for students unfamiliar with honors or advanced education, we need to be especially sensitive to the likelihood of self-selecting out of honors based on an assumption of ineligibility.

By building our recruitment practices on studies that focused on students who were applying or engaging in honors education (Hill, 2005; Rhea & Goodwin, 2014; Nichols & Chang, 2013; Wolfensberger & Offringa, 2012) and that were based on samples of students who were predominately White (Nichols & Chang, 2013), or of the majority culture (Wolfensberger & Offringa), or not specified (Hill, 2005), we were missing the diverse voices of those who were opting out, unintentionally creating an institutional barrier to their participation. We know that we need to recruit students not only by pointing to the valor of responding to challenge, the prestige of the degree, or the learning environment, but we also need to address burnout, bread and butter concerns like cost, and our students' vision of their future selves.

Our study was small, with participants willing to talk to us for an hour or so, so our findings have limited generalizability. While focus group interviews are excellent for allowing participants to cross-talk, a feature that often results in richer conversation and fuller data, the strength of this design is predicated on all participants being equally active. Without this assurance, individual interviews are advisable, and future studies should be conducted with one-on-one interviews to complement the findings from focus groups. These limitations notwithstanding, we appreciate what the students have helped us understand regarding impediments within our recruitment efforts.

Contemporary literature shows that high-achieving students from low-income homes and from minority backgrounds, or who are non-native English speakers (Mead, 2018), are less likely to persist in college and have to struggle to meet their psychosocial needs (Wilson, 2019). A potential byproduct of inappropriate academic fit is limited aspirations and insufficient talent development (Ambrose, 2013). Thus, the goal of increased diversity in honors is a benefit not just for students enrolled in honors education but for equitable treatment of students from all backgrounds. As Miller and Dumford (2018) report, honors education positively affects high-ability students, affording them the opportunity to richly engage with their disciplines and faculty within their disciplines. Several of the students in our interviews were inquisitive about the honors college, and when we described our classes and activities, they expressed an interest in participating because they could see the connection between their plans for the future and small classes, study abroad opportunities, and research experiences with faculty. We thus need to continue exploring why students of color who are eligible for honors decide not to participate because this issue concerns not only academics but social justice.

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