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The Experiences Of Black Males In Honors Colleges

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THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MALES IN HONORS COLLEGES

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my brother, for letting me pretend to be a teacher

before my first day of kindergarten, and for always believing in me.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Black Males in honors colleges. Specifically this study aims to highlight the successes, challenges, and common experiences of Black males in honors colleges. To this end, the researcher interviewed six Black men in an honors college located in a predominantly White institution in the southeast. This study sought to share a story of success to counteract the majoritarian narrative of Black male underachievement. Critical Race Theory provided a framework and lens to help understand the emergent themes and findings. Through interviews with the study participants the following seven themes emerged; 1) the importance of faculty, staff, and student relationships 2) involvement in civic engagement, social justice, and advocacy 3) the role of advanced placement and international baccalaureate courses in preparing students for college 4) the importance of personal and familial expectations 5) the role of beyond the classroom opportunities in identity development 6) lack of visibility and representation 7) navigation of stereotypes, microaggressions, and racism. These seven themes help us to understand the experiences of the population being studied and come together to help highlight the successes of the study participants.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Significance

Upon a review of the research on Black undergraduate males it is clear that there

is an overabundance of literature focusing on the challenges and underachievement of

this population and a lack of research focusing on high-achieving Black undergraduate

males. Starting in the late 1990s, scholars such as Fred Bonner, Sharron Fries-Britt,

Kimberly Griffin, Shaun Harper, and Terrell Strayhorn started laying the foundation for

the study of successful Black males at predominantly White universities and small private

liberal arts colleges. There is a need to build upon this research by focusing on the stories

of high-achieving Black males at different types of institutions. This research study will

contribute to the literature base by focusing on the experiences of Black males in an

honors college setting at a large predominantly White institution in the southeast. In

addition to contributing to the literature, this research has practical implications for

higher education and for honors colleges. By highlighting the factors that best support the

success of high-achieving Black males and the factors that create challenges for these

students, this thesis will serve as a resource for higher education and student affairs

professionals.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The lack of research on high-achieving Black males and the prominence of deficit-laden research is deeply problematic because it paints a picture of Black male underachievement while ignoring the stories of Black male achievement and success (Harper, 2005, p.9). To provide context, the deficit perspective focuses on an achievement gap rather than an opportunity gap. It blames individuals and communities for 'underachievement' rather than highlighting the role that structural racism plays in unequal access to educational opportunities. The combination of research focusing on academic failure and a lack of research focusing on high-achieving students has three main negative effects. First, ignoring the experiences of high-achieving Black males doesn't provide educators with the resources, knowledge, and tools to best serve this population. The words of Sharon Fries-Britt and Kimberly Griffin (2007) speak to this sentiment, "Black high achievers remain an understudied segment of the student population; consequently we know far less about their academic, social, and psychological needs and experiences" (p.509). These students have the potential to succeed greatly and to impact the world around them, and like any student, they deserve the support to help them achieve their goals. This study aims to provide educators with the knowledge to better support their Black male students.

Second, focusing on the "achievement gap" has the potential to lead educators to have lower expectations for their Black male students. The damaging consequences of the focus on the underachievement of Black males is poignantly captured by Sharon Fries-Britt (1998) in *Moving Beyond Black Achiever Isolation: Experiences of Gifted Black Collegians*, "the disproportionate focus on Black underachievement in the

literature not only distorts the image of the community of Black collegians, it creates, perhaps unintentionally, a lower set of expectations for Black student achievement." (p.556). It would be impossible to ignore the fact that the opportunity gap exists, however it is critical to understand that this gap is promoted not by individual characteristics in the Black population but by an education system plagued by structural racism and inequality. This thesis will demonstrate the importance and power of high expectations and accountability by highlighting the connections between high expectations and the success of the participants.

Finally, on a basic level, focusing on the academic challenges of a population but not on the success is unethical and damaging. Noted researcher Shaun Harper (2009) highlighted that "there should be something embarrassing about publishing only deficit-laden scholarship that depicts Black men as 'at-risk'" (p. 709). For society to progress, the literature base must appropriately represent the lived experiences of all people. Understanding the experiences of Black males in honors colleges will shed light on the methods students and families used to navigate the education system, will highlight stories of success, and will thereby create more accurate representation in the literature. This thesis represents a small addition to the research base that will hopefully one day accurately represent the experiences of Black males.

1.3 Research Questions

The following questions helped to guide this research study:

1. What factors have led to the success of Black males in honors colleges and how do these students perceive their success?

2. What challenges have Black males in honors colleges faced and how have they navigated these challenges?

3. What are the common experiences of Black males in honors colleges?

1.4 Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

Throughout this study, I will be using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a lens for understanding the experiences of high-achieving Black males. Critical Race Theory focuses on the role that race and racism play in the education system (Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado Bernal, & Solorzano, 2001). Critical Race Theory originated as a response to Critical Legal Studies and expanded into the field of education at the hands of Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate.

The purpose of this thesis fits with the five tenets of critical race methodology that Solorzano and Yosso (2002) described in *Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research*. The five tenets of critical race theory are: 1) "The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination." 2) "The challenge to dominant ideology." 3) "The commitment to social justice." 4) "The centrality of experiential knowledge." 5) "The transdisciplinary perspective" (pp.25-27).

This thesis focuses on race and seeks to share the experiences of high-achieving Black males in honors colleges who have successfully navigated the education system. Furthermore, while this thesis focuses on race, it also seeks to understand the intersection of identity. At its heart, this study seeks to challenge the idea that success in education is purely merit based and seeks to challenge deficit-laden research by sharing the stories of

high-achieving Black males. My hope is that this study will act as a call to action. More research is needed, more reforms in the education system are needed, and more people need to fight for equal access to education at all levels. The successes of the students in this study should serve to empower other students to succeed themselves or to help faculty and staff support other students. As a qualitative study, this research project is grounded in the voices and lived experiences of the participants.

In Tara Yosso's (2006) article, *Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth*, she perfectly summarizes the significance of critical race theory as a theoretical framework for this study. "Many in the academy and in community organizing, activism, and service who look to challenge social inequality will most likely recognize the tenets of CRT as part of what, why and how they do the work they do" (p.74). One of the key components of Critical Race Theory is the counter-story. Solórzano and Yosso define the counter-story as, "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (p.32). One of the fundamental motivations for writing this thesis was to use counter-storytelling to share the stories and voices of Black males in honors colleges, and by doing so to fill a gap in the literature and challenge a majoritarian story that focuses on underachievement.

1.5 Positionality

My interest in this topic stems from two contradicting experiences. As an undergraduate student, I was deeply interested in educational policy and access to quality

education at all levels. I enrolled in several educational policy classes and learned a one-sided story about the achievement gap and the underachievement of Black students. Between 2012 and 2014 I worked as an AmeriCorps*VISTA in an honors college at a predominantly White institution. In this role, I saw a stark contrast to the coursework I was taught in college; I worked with a handful of high-achieving Black males who were smart, motivated, and hardworking. Throughout my two years as an AmeriCorps*VISTA, I wondered why my college coursework hadn't highlighted their stories and successes. Not unsurprisingly, upon a review of the literature, it seems clear that I wasn't exposed to the stories of high-achieving Black males because there is an over-abundance of deficit-laden research that ignores the stories of high-achieving Black males. This thesis aims to counter the majoritarian narrative of underachievement by sharing the success stories of high-achieving Black males. My hope is that future students will sit in educational policy classrooms and will hear a more representative story about the experiences of Black males.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section will highlight themes that have emerged in studies that focus on the experiences of high-achieving undergraduate Black males. The second section will include a review of the literature regarding the education system for Black males. The purpose of this section will be to provide readers with an idea of the educational inequalities and systematic obstacles that occur at every point in the education system. The final section will provide a history and overview of honors colleges in the United States. The goal of this section is to provide readers with a context for understanding the characteristics of honors colleges so that they can better understand the experiences of undergraduate Black males within this setting.

2.1 Black Males and The Education System

Significance of Educational Achievement and Attainment

Educational achievement and attainment as dictated by the current educational standards and is intensely connected to both the success of individuals and society at large. There is a strong correlation between educational attainment and higher earnings and higher employment rates (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). While education has the power to be a catalyst for social mobility, in reality it often reinforces inequality. The impact educational attainment has on employment and earnings highlights the significance of the inequalities within the education system.

With each level of education reached, employment rates are steadily higher. According to The Condition of Education 2015, "the employment rate for persons ages 25-64 with a bachelor's or higher degree was 82 percent, compared with a rate of 73 percent for those with some college education but no degree and a rate of 55 percent for those with no high school credential" (Kena, Muou-Gillette&Robinson, 2015, p.18). These numbers demonstrate the impact of access to education on job attainment for individuals. Furthermore, with an economy that is shifting to jobs that require higher levels of education, there is a shortfall of qualified workers. In the next two years, the United States will need 22 million new college degrees but will be off by 3 million degrees. The workforce needs educated employees and individuals need education to achieve higher earnings and employment (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). The United States economy and individual citizens of the United States are both paying the price for an educational system that does not provide equal opportunities in access and excellence for all students. Every time a student does not meet their potential, that student loses out as does society.

Higher levels of education also correlate with higher earnings. Similarly to the employment statistics, earnings increase with every additional level of education. "In 2013, median earnings for young adults with a bachelor's degree were $48,500, compared with $23,900 for those without a high school credential, $30,000 for those with a high school credential, and $37,500 for those with an associate's degree," and $59,600 for those with a master's degree or higher (Kena, Muou-Gillette&Robinson, 2015, p.43). Conversely, family income level is a major factor in access to educational opportunity. By age 25, 10% of students from low-income families have a bachelor's degree in

comparison to 50% of students from high-income families (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). A vicious cycle is at play, in which students from families who are low-income are less likely to obtain a postsecondary degree, are likely to earn less and have lower employment rates, and will therefore have children who are less likely to have a high level of educational attainment. Enrolling in and graduating from college has the potential to change the lives of individuals as well as their families.

Inequality in the System

This section will begin with Black male attainment of master's degrees and then will provide a quick snap shot of the statistics at the undergraduate level and the K-12 level. In 2014, 4% of Black men and women between the ages of 25 and 29 attained at least a master's degree. In comparison, 9% of White students between the ages of 25 and 29 attained at least a master's degree. In that same year, 22% of Black people between the ages of 25 and 29 attained at least a bachelor's degree. In comparison, 41% of White students between the ages of 25 and 29 attained at least a bachelor's degree. The opportunity gap between White and Black students also appears at the secondary school level, "Among male young adults, a higher percentage of Hispanics (28 percent) than Blacks (20 percent), Whites (16 percent), and Asians (11 percent) had not completed high school" (Kena, Muou-Gillette&Robinson, 2015, p.16).

The data from the last section raises the question, why does the opportunity gap exist? Different scholars have viewed this opportunity gap through the lens of critical race theory and have argued that there is an opportunity gap because of structural racism in the education system. In the foundational piece, Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education, Gloria Ladson-Billings emphasizes that "race is still a significant factor in

determining inequity in the United States" and that looking at the intersection of race and property can help us understand this inequity (1995, p.22). Dr. Ladson-Billings explains that part of this intersection involves the "absolute right to exclude" – the premise being that historically and currently Black students, by virtue of being Black have been excluded from accessing quality education at all levels.

> In school, the absolute right to exclude was demonstrated initially by denying blacks access to schooling altogether. Later, it was demonstrated by the creation and maintenance of separate schools. More recently it has been demonstrated by white flight and the growing instance on vouchers, public funding of private schools, and schools of choice. Within schools, absolute right to exclude is demonstrated by resegregation via tracking, the institution of "gifted" programs, honors programs, and advanced placement classes. So complete is this exclusion that black students often come to the university in the role of intruders – who have been granted special permission to be there (1995, p. 60).

Using Ladson-Billings' work as a launch pad, this section will highlight the negative effects of tracking, gifted programs, and advanced placement classes.

Current Exclusion

Tracking is a current feature of education that aims to group students by ability level. Tracking is based upon the notion that grouping students creates classrooms with less of a range of academic ability, thereby making it easier for the teacher and student. Supporters of tracking believe that it allows students to move at their own pace and that it thereby improves the confidence of students (Ansalone, 2003). Tracking gives high-

achieving students the opportunity to move at a faster and more rigorous pace. Tracking

is not implemented uniformly across the United States, but the effects of tracking on

Black students as a group are generally harmful. The underrepresentation of Black

students in higher-level tracks has created a modern day segregation, which excludes

Black students from the classes with the best teachers, most resources and most

comprehensive curriculum.

A snapshot of tracking in South Orange Maplewood School District may

highlight the scope of this problem. In 2014, White students represented 44.1% of the

total enrollment and Black student represented 47.4% of the total enrollment. In

comparison, White students represented 73.2% of the Upper Level Math enrollment

while Black students represented 11.6% of the Upper Level Math enrollment (Ansalone,

2003). This snapshot is a clear example that White students and Black students within the

same school district have differing levels of access to quality education. Tracking into

honors courses often leads to enrollment in Advanced Placement courses, and therefore

lack of access to honors courses creates a lack of access to Advanced Placement courses,

and therefore to college.

Similarly to tracking, Black students are underrepresented in Advanced Placement

(AP) courses. Advanced Placement refers to courses offered in high school that are

college-level and that offer students college credit if completed successfully. Enrollment

and achievement in AP courses are critical components of college admissions and are

integral to preparing students to succeed and thrive academically in college. With that in

mind, underrepresentation is especially problematic. According to the literature, "students

of color attend schools of lesser quality than White students" (Solórzano & Ornelas,

2004, p.16), and one aspect of this "lesser quality" is fewer if any AP course offerings. Griffin and Allen (2006) highlight that the urban schools that enroll large numbers of Black students are underfunded, under resourced, and have fewer advanced courses. Additionally, even if Black students attend a high quality school with a challenging curriculum, that doesn't necessarily mean that those students will have the opportunity to enroll in those classes (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002). According to the 10th Annual AP Report to the Nation, three out of ten Black students who have the potential to succeed in AP coursework actually enroll in AP classes (p.29).

Success in Advanced Placement courses has the ability to prepare students for college. Therefore, unequal access to AP courses connects directly with differing levels of preparation for college level coursework. In a study conducted by Barbara Rascoe and Mary Monrow Atwater about Black male self-perceptions of academic ability, the researchers noted that there is a significant relationship between enrollment in advanced science course and achievement in science classes in college (Rascoe and Atwater, 2005). Similarly, in their research on high-achieving Black males who are low-income and working-class, Kimberly Griffin and Walter Allen (2006) emphasized that, "AP courses are deemed some of the most challenging (and valuable) courses available; offering students the opportunity to strengthen their academic record in preparation for college admissions as well as to earn college credits", and inner city urban schools "often lack [these] rigorous courses" (p.479). The underrepresentation of Black students in honors and AP courses regardless of ability or potential represents a structural issue that impacts the opportunities of Black students in both high school and college. Colleges are using enrollment in AP courses as a standard in admissions, however Black male students are

not given the opportunity to enroll in these courses at the same rate as White students. Black males are being systematically excluded from classes that contribute to college preparation and success. Greater attention needs to be given to why Black male students aren't being tracked into honors classes and placed in Advanced Placement courses.

2.2 High-Achieving Black Males

Within the literature focused on high-achieving Black students, there are two main trends in the presentation of information. First, there is more research on high-achieving Black students at the k-12 level than at the higher education level. Second, the majority of the literature on undergraduate Black students generalizes the experiences of all Black students in institutions of higher education. Treating this population as a monolithic group ignores the diverse experiences created by intersecting identities such as race and gender (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Harper & Nichols, 2008). That being said, several notable scholars have published anti-deficit research that highlights and explores the experiences of high-achieving Black undergraduate males (Bonner, 2001; Fries-Britt, 1997; Griffin, 2006; Harper, 2005, 2008, 2009; Herbert, 2002, Strayhorn; 2008, 2010). This section will explore three themes that have emerged from this literature base, including the prominence and importance of engagement both inside and outside the classroom, the significance of relationships between students and faculty and staff, and the challenges and obstacles created by racism and the methods high-achieving Black males use to overcome these challenges.

Student Engagement

A variety of qualitative studies highlighted that high-achieving Black males are engaged in educationally purposeful activities outside of the classroom and that these

experiences positively impact academic success and personal and professional growth. Increasingly, success in college is determined by engagement both within and outside the classroom and by students' ability to make connections between their experiences. George Kuh (2003) defined student engagement as "the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside the classroom, and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities" (p. 24-25). This section will explore the impact that participation in outside the classroom activities has on the success of high-achieving Black males.

Student engagement is positively linked to increased persistence, retention, and graduation rates (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Just as importantly, these experiences have led students to successful and positive collegiate experiences. In *Black Male Student Success in Higher Education: A Report From the National Black Male College Achievement Study,* Harper states that "the achievers attributed much of their college success to their engagement experiences" (2012, p. 12). Similarly, in a different report, Harper emphasized, "active engagement in multiple venues for learning significantly enhances the undergraduate experience for African American males" (2005, p.14).

In addition to helping to support student academic achievement, engagement also helps students to succeed in their transition out of college by positively impacting professional development and growth. Herbert (2002) found that the students in his study had strengths and skills that were significantly developed through outside the classroom activities. Similarly, Harper (2003) found that the high-achieving Black men in his study developed practical skills through their leadership in student organizations. Leadership

and participation in student organizations often allows students the opportunity to develop transferable skills that will aid them in their future careers.

Involvement in outside the classroom activities has also proven to enhance the personal development of high-achieving Black males, among other students. In their study of 600 Black males at a historically Black institution and 600 Black males at a predominantly White institution (PWI), Desousa and Kuh (1996) found that beyond the classroom experiences led Black students at PWIs to a tremendous amount of personal development. Student engagement is important for the success of high-achieving Black males because it helps to support personal, professional, and academic growth.

Relationships between Faculty and Staff and Students

The current literature paints a complex and multifaceted picture of the relationships between high-achieving Black males and faculty and staff. While the literature suggests that Black males, and males in general have negative or non-existent relationships with faculty/staff (Fries-Britt, 1997, p.71) there is a good deal of literature that highlights the positive relationship between high-achieving Black males and faculty and staff. The existing research suggests that high-achieving Black males have positive and influential relationships with faculty and staff because of their academic capabilities (Fries Britt, 1994), their high level of engagement (Harper, 2005), and personal characteristics like self-confidence and determination (Allen, 1992).

The relationships between high-achieving Black males and faculty and staff are important because these relationships have been proven to increase levels of academic success and satisfaction, motivation, and retention. Student-faculty relationships are important for the retention and intellectual development of students (Tinto, 1987) and

informal interactions between students and faculty members lead to an increase in educational outcomes for students (Pascerella, 1989).

Harper explained that one of the factors in faculty/staff and student relationships that leads to academic and professional success were that because of their relationships with faculty members outside of the classroom, high-achieving Black male students sought to impress these faculty members when they were enrolled in their classes. Another factor that leads to success for these students is that through mentoring relationships with university staff, students are able to gain practical skillsets (Harper, 2005). Studies have also shown that relationships with faculty/staff can lead these students to pursuing and attaining additional academic scholarships and letters of recommendation (Bonner, 2001; Harper, 2005). The literature suggests that faculty and staff have the power to connect high-achieving Black males to resources, provide professional development, and act as mentors and role models who provide a level of accountability.

A variety of scholars have highlighted the connection between satisfaction and student-faculty and staff relationships. In his study, Strayhorn stated that "those Black men who reported having frequent and varied supportive relationships with faculty, staff, and peers were more likely than other Black males to be highly satisfied with college" (2008, p. 40). The relationships between faculty, staff, and students have a powerful impact on the experiences of Black males in college and beyond.

On the other hand, scholars who have focused on the experiences of high-achieving Black males have also noted that these students do encounter negative

interactions with faculty/staff. There are several research studies that document the perception that professors were not supportive of their high-achieving Black students. Fries-Britt found that Black students reported feeling that their professors questioned their academic abilities. (2007) In addition, Fries-Britt and Griffiths' research suggests that Black students at predominantly White institutions are subject to both overt racism and microaggressions from peers as well as faculty and staff, and "overcoming these stereotypical perceptions can add additional burdens to Black high-achievers…and doubts of the academic abilities and talents of Black students have been found to be particularly damaging to their achievement and self-esteem" (p.511). In their qualitative study of nine high-achieving black students (six females and three males) in an honors program at a state university, these researchers found that students felt that they had to dispel stereotypes and myths held by faculty members. Faculty and staff hold the power to either positively or negatively impact the experiences of high-achieving Black males. The literature points to the huge potential that faculty and staff have to help students realize and achieve their goals.

Microaggressions, Stereotypes, and Racism

Much of the literature that focuses on high-achieving Black males emphasizes the challenges that these college students face, ranging from microaggressions to overt racism to isolation (Griffin, 2006). Black students face hostility and stereotypes at higher rates than their white counterparts (Fries Britt, 1998) and Black males face racism, discrimination and social stigmas at higher rates than their female counterparts (Sanders, 2010). Racism and discrimination go beyond individual faculty, staff, and peers, and are present in the campus climate of institutions across the United States. Samuel Meseus

found that "many students of color experience difficulties connecting to the cultures of PWIs….and endure feelings of alienation, marginalization, and unwelcome campus climate" (2011, p.148). This is deeply concerning and significant because sense of belonging and the connection that students have with their campus play a large role in determining the success of those students.

Furthermore, navigating stereotypes, racism and isolation can have detrimental effects to the mental health and wellbeing of high-achieving Black males. Ebony McGee and David Stovall (2015) argue that the grit and resilience necessary to navigate racist social structures and educational systems masks the suffering and mental health concerns that arise from constant experiences with racism.

High-achieving Black males are intensely engaged in their campus communities and in educationally purposeful activities beyond the classroom, and are encouraged and motivated by faculty/staff at their institutions. By choice, these students spend time and energy on their academics and involvements, but unfortunately are also forced to spend time and energy navigating generally unwelcoming campus environments.

2.3 History and Overview of Honors Colleges

This research study explores the experiences of Black males in an honors college setting at a predominantly White public institution. Given the nature of this research, it may be helpful for the reader to understand the history and development of honors colleges as well as the components that make up an honors college in the Untied States.

History of Honors Colleges

Modern honors colleges and programs began forming in the 1920s and expanded in two waves during the second half of the twentieth century. Honors education at the college level was established by Frank Ayddelotte in 1922 at Swarthmore College (Rinn, 2003). In his inaugural address introducing the idea of honors education, Frank Ayddelotte stated,

> Perhaps the most fundamentally wasteful feature of our educational institutions is the lack of a higher standard of intellectual attainment. We are educating more students up to a fair average than any country in the world, but we are wastefully allowing the capacity of the average to prevent us from bringing the best up to the standards they could reach. Our most important task at the present is to check this waste. The method of doing it seems clear: to separate those students who are really interested in intellectual life from those who are not…(Wood, 2011, p.43)

At the time of Ayddelotte's inaugural address, an increasing number of students were enrolling in institutions of higher education thereby widening the spectrum of 'intellectual abilities'. Ayddelotte was motivated by the idea that all students should have an opportunity to maximize their intellectual potential (Rinn, 2003, p. 33). Soon thereafter, the honors education movement spread to other institutions.

In 1928, Joseph Cohen created the Honors Council at the University of Colorado, thereby beginning the spread of honors colleges to large public institutions. Cohen is known for his promotion of the idea that honors education could benefit institutions overall (Guzy, 2003, p. 21) According to Guzy (2003), Cohen also helped to found the

Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student, an organization that aimed to support the development and expansion of honors programs and colleges (p. 21). Not long after the spread of honors education, social and political developments across the country and globally also likely impacted the focus on expansion.

In 1956, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, prompting the institutions within the U.S. to expand the number of honors colleges across the United States, thereby improving the quality of education across the nation (Guzy, 2003, p.19). Cosgrove (2004) notes that the second wave of honors college expansions occurred in the second half of the twentieth century as a way for colleges to attract high-achieving students (p. 46). The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) was founded in 1966 as a response to a call for an organization that would create a structure and network for honors colleges. NCHC supports honors college across the nation by facilitating conferences, publishing literature on honors education, spreading information about honors education, promoting honors associations, and implementing special projects.

Characteristics of Honors Colleges

Currently, honors colleges are present in 60% of four-year institutions in the United States (Achterberg, 2004). With the increasing presence of honors colleges, a substantial amount of literature has been published highlighting the various characteristics and components of honors colleges. This section of the literature review aims to highlight the common components that make up honors colleges, to explore the benefits of honors colleges to students and to shine a light on the characteristics of honors college students.

Typically, honors colleges are known for their "small classes, increased faculty interaction, research and independent study opportunities, an enriched curriculum, special honors advising, and optional honors housing" (Campbell, 2006, p.27). Many of these features go hand in hand with one another to enhance student experience and achievement. For example, small classes have been linked to increasing the potential for individualized attention between faculty members and students (Fischer, 1996). In addition, in his study of 172 students, Shushok (2006) found that honors college students are more likely than non-honors college students to meet with faculty members and to talk about aspirations with those faculty members. In *Student Outcomes and Honors Programs: A longitudinal Study of 172 Honors Students 2000-2004* Shushok noted that the differences in quality and quantity of faculty/student relationships is heightened for male students. Male honors students are "4.7 times more likely than non-honors males to meet with a faculty member during office hours" (p. 93). The increase in contact between students and faculty members is significant because relationships between faculty and students positively influence student involvement and motivation to succeed (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p.3).

While there is limited research on the impact of honors colleges on students, a variety of studies have pointed to the impact honors colleges have on academic performance and outside the classroom engagement. In a longitudinal study comparing the academic performance, retention and degree-completion of students who completed an honors program and students who did not complete an honors program, Cosgrove (2004) found that students who complete an honors program have higher graduation rates, graduate quicker, and perform better academically (p. 45). The literature also

suggests that honors college students are more likely to be both involved and engaged. In Shushok's (2006) longitudinal study he found that male honors college students are more likely than male non-honors students to participate in beyond the classroom opportunities.

Based on a brief exploration of honors college websites, it emerges that many honors colleges in large public institutions describe themselves as "the best of both worlds," suggesting that students in honors colleges receive the personal attention and high quality education of a smaller school but with the resources of a large state school (Loftus, 2015). Honors colleges take on the campus climate and culture of the larger school, but are able to provide additional academic and personal support for students.

Summary

This section provided a discussion of the literature focused on high-achieving Black undergraduate males, the experiences of Black males in the education system, and a history and overview of honors colleges. There were two main goals for this section. First, the literature review aimed to provide readers with a context to understand the findings of this study. Second, this section should help readers to place this study within the larger pool of research.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

This section aims to give readers the tools and information necessary to replicate this study at different institutions, thereby increasing the amount of anti-deficit research on this topic. Additionally, this chapter will provide the reasoning behind the researchers' choice of qualitative methods and will describe the researchers' positionality and limitations of the study.

3.1 Overview of Study

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of undergraduate Black males in honors colleges. This study aims to shed light on the successes, challenges, and stories of these high-achieving students, and by doing so, to ensure that the stories of these students are heard and documented. The goal of this study is to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors have led to the success of Black males in honors colleges and how do these students perceive their success?

2. What challenges have Black males in honors colleges faced and how have they navigated these challenges?

3. What are the common experiences of Black males in honors colleges?

3.2 Qualitative Methods

The purpose of this study fits naturally and seamlessly with the advantages of qualitative methods. Qualitative methods allow researchers to gain a deeper understanding of how people make meaning of their lived experiences. By using qualitative methods the researcher was able to use the participants' own words to produce a rich narrative. Qualitative methods created a setting in which participants could share and make meaning out of their lived experiences. Additionally, qualitative methods provided the flexibility needed for participants to share their stories and go on tangents that they felt were important without being boxed in by a set-in-stone protocol. Within the theoretical framework of critical race theory, using qualitative methods allow participants to share their stories and narratives.

3.3 Participant Selection

To identify participants, the researcher worked with upper level administrators in the study site. The researcher was able to use criterion sampling to locate the first three participants for this study, and snowball sampling to then locate three more participants for this study. To participate in this study, students had to be undergraduate students who identified as Black males and were enrolled in the Honors College during the 2014-2015 academic year. The participants in this study are categorized as high-achieving by virtue of being accepted into and persisting through the Honors College. Within this qualification, the participants are high-achieving according to the standards of the education system. The participants have exceptional incoming characteristics (SAT/ACT, GPA, enrollment in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses) and achievement at the college level (persistence, GPA, leadership).

3.4 Site

This study was conducted at an honors college within a predominantly white, large public research institution in the southeastern United States. The Honors College is located in an urban center. The Honors College is an ideal site for this study because it is one of the top public honors colleges in the nation, and in 2014, A Review of Fifty Public Honors Programs, gave it the highest overall ranking that an honors college can recieve. The average GPA of incoming students for the 2014 class was 4.69 and the average SAT range was 1390-1470. These admissions figures suggest that any student who is enrolled in the Honors College was academically high-achieving by the standards of the United Stated educational system. Furthermore, the retention rate averages at 97.4% and the six-year graduation rate is 91.67%, comparable rates to Ivy League institutions. At the same time, in the past the Honors College has struggled with enrolling a diverse student body, but has been committed to this pursuit. This site is also intriguing because it is located in an area with historic and present tenuous race relations.

3.5 Data Collection

Based on the criteria listed above, and with the help of Honors College faculty, staff, and interview participants, the researcher was able to locate six students in the Honors College who fit the study criteria and were willing to participate in the study. The researcher sent an initial e-mail to seven students describing the study and asking for volunteers. From the list of seven students, six agreed to participate, and one graciously declined to participate.

The researcher interviewed six participants using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions based on an interview protocol (APPENDIX A). This interview protocol was created with the guidance of the literature in the field and of mentors with expertise in this topic. Specifically, Shaun Harper's (2012) report, *Black Male Student Success in Higher Education*, offered guidance for using an anti-deficit framework to research this population.

Prior to each interview, participants were provided with a copy of the informed consent (APPENDIX B) and were talked through the different steps that would be taken to protect their privacy. To protect the privacy of participants all data were stored on the researchers' password protected laptop, which was stored in the researchers' locked house. The researcher used her personal password-protected cellphone to record the interviews, and immediately moved the recordings from their cellphone to their laptop after each interview.

3.6 Data Analysis

Emergent themes evolved through a process of data analysis and immersion in the data. After data collection was complete, I transcribed each interview and then read through the interview transcripts twice and organically developing first impressions. Constant comparative analysis (1965) was used to analyze the data. I read through the transcripts and then coded the data, resulting in 112 codes. I then read through a list of the codes three times and was able to combine certain codes. My final step was to group the codes together thereby creating seven distinct themes, which will be shared and discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

3.7 Validity

To ensure that the experiences of the participants in the study were represented as accurately as possible I used member checking. Member checking gave participants the ability to provide feedback on the original transcript, the emergent themes, and an outline of the thesis to ensure that this study represented the participants' lived experiences accurately. I also employed peer debriefing to ensure that I was thinking critically about this study. Creswell and Miller (2010) note "A peer reviewer provides support, plays devil's advocate, challenges the researchers' assumptions, pushes the researchers to the next step methodologically, and asks hard questions about methods and interpretations" (p.129). Use of peer debriefing helped to provide me with external feedback that was integral to this study.

3.8 Researcher's Positionality

My interest in researching the experiences of Black males stems from two contradicting experiences. As an undergraduate student, I was interested in educational inequality and access to high quality education for all students. I sat in classrooms and learned about the achievement gap, about the crisis in our education system, and about the school to prison pipeline. As a student, I learned a one sided story about the challenges that Black men face in their educational journey. In contrast, between 2012 and 2014 I worked as an AmeriCorps*VISTA in an honors college, and I worked with a handful of high-achieving Black male students. The students I worked with were smart, personable, and ambitious. Throughout my two years I wondered why I hadn't learned about their stories and their successes as a student in college and why the lessons I learned as an undergraduate were so one-sided. It is my goal to share the other side of the story.

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That being said, I go into this research having deep concerns about being another white person trying to tell the stories of people of color (I identify as a White female). However, I care deeply about this topic and am committed to letting my participants' voices shine through. In this study, I view myself as a tool to compile their stories. I acknowledge that I am not giving anyone a voice. The participants in this study already have voices. My desire is to give the participants' voices a metaphorical megaphone, to allow their stories to be heard by faculty and staff in the field. I believe strongly that all people deserve to be celebrated for their identities and warrant an equal opportunity not only to succeed, but also to have their successes shared.

3.9 Limitations

This study has three major limitations. First, this study has limited generalizability. The target population was small and represented the experiences of students at one honors college, within one predominantly white institution in the southeast and therefore the findings cannot and should not be generalized to the entire population of Black males in honors colleges. That being said, the study findings may help student affairs professionals support Black male undergraduate students in honors colleges. Additionally, many of the findings of this study affirm the findings of researchers like Harper, Bonner, Fries-Britt, Griffin, and Strayhorn. The greater the amount of literature that is published on high-achieving Black males in different institutional settings, the more conclusions we can draw about the experiences of this population.

Second, in any qualitative study, a limitation is that the researcher is an instrument in the analysis and the researcher brings their own identities and biases that may affect the study results. As a White female, it is possible that participants may have

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felt less comfortable candidly sharing about their experiences. Additionally, my experiences as a White female may have impacted the way that I analyzed the data. Member checking was used to ensure that the product represented the realities of participants as fully and accurately as possibly, but it is impossible to completely remove the researchers' role from the study.

Finally, before this study, the researcher had worked in a professional context with three of the participants. As a result, the researcher may have entered the study with a set of pre-existing assumptions. Additionally, the previous relationship between the researcher and participants as well as the researchers' previous status as a staff member could deter students from sharing fully. Conversely, previous relationships may have acted as a strength for the researcher and participants may have been more likely to share comfortably and fully.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter will highlight the findings of this study. To provide a road map, this chapter will begin with a descriptive overview and then will transition into a description of the seven emergent themes. This chapter represents the heart of this thesis and will focus on sharing the stories of the six study participants. This aims to be a space dedicated to sharing the voices of the participants and providing context to better understand their lived experiences.

4.1 Overview of Participants

Kenny: Kenny is an in-state student from a mid-sized city in the southeastern United States. He graduated from the Honors College in 2015 and is currently in Graduate School preparing to be a teacher. Kenny was identified as gifted and talented in the third grade and has been in gifted programming since fourth grade although he felt unchallenged and disengaged in his elementary and middle school. In high school, Kenny attended a magnet school that ranks in the top ten schools nationally (according to *US News and World Report*) and was held to a new set of expectations. Kenny shared that his high school experiences prepared him for his transition to college. Kenny was not in the Honors College when he began at Southeastern University, but transferred into the Honors College during his sophomore year with the urging and support of staff members in the Honors College. Kenny was the president of multiple service organizations and has

won national and campus-wide awards recognizing him for his service to the community. Kenny is deeply committed to his own education and to supporting the education of students. Kenny has a strong relationship with multiple faculty and staff members and has developed a mentor/mentee relationship with several upper level administrators at Southeastern University.

Patrick: Patrick is an in-state student whose hometown is 30 minutes away from Southeastern University. Patrick decided to attend Southeastern University because of the ranking of the school, the location, and the in-state tuition. Patrick expected to get one of the best educations that his home state could offer and feels that the University has met those expectations because of the brilliant professors and the doors that the Honors College has opened for him. Patrick attended a rigorous high school and took AP courses which prepared him for the transition to college. Patrick is involved with different organizations related to his career field and has learned leadership skills and people skills through his involvements. Patrick has been in gifted programming since middle school and attributes his academic success to his family's desire for him to get the best education possible.

Seth: Seth is an out-of-state student from a city in the southeastern part of the United States. Seth chose to attend Southeastern University because of its location, "it was far enough away from home to feel like I was on my own, but close enough to home that my mom is still okay with it," and the scholarship package that the University offered him. In high school, Seth was enrolled in International Baccalaureate courses which he describes as being more difficult than his college courses. Learning and gaining knowledge are

important to Seth and he and loves being in an environment that supports structured learning. Seth is interested in several different career paths but is especially interested in working with LGBT homeless youth. Seth has great relationships with faculty and staff at the University and hopes to form relationships with staff members that resemble friendships.

Stewart: Stewart is an in-state student who was born and raised in the same city as Southeastern University. Stewart graduated from the Honors College in 2015 with a science major and a foreign language minor. Stewart is planning on attending graduate school in the coming year. Growing up, Stewart attended a predominantly White private school and has been in honors programming since middle school. Stewart enrolled in AP courses in high school. Coming to Southeastern University, Stewart's expectations were to "pursue [his] intellectual curiosity while enjoying [himself]', and meeting new people, and pursuing [his] dreams." While in college, Stewart participated in cultural student organizations and studied abroad. Stewart described that a lot of his involvements were part of a journey towards finding his identity and self-esteem. During his interview, Stewart emphasized the importance of learning from history to make lasting structural changes to our society.

Charlie: Charlie is an in-state student who moved around a lot as a child but has lived in a major urban center in the southeastern United States since he was in the sixth grade. Charlie is a science major, has a humanities minor, and is interested in going to medical school and then becoming a doctor after he graduates from college. Prior to attending Southeastern University, Charlie attended public middle-of-the-road schools. Charlie says

that a summer camp for pre-medical students at Southeastern University helped him to acclimate and transition into college life. Charlie is a member of a variety of organizations, several service organizations, and he is the president of a service organization. For Charlie, success means that he is able to give back to other people. Charlie is self-described as friendly, and because of this he has developed relationships with many faculty, staff members, and peers. Charlie is a role model for his cousins and he views it as his responsibility to set the bar for his younger family members. Charlie is first-generation American and attributes some of his educational success to the priority that his parents placed on education as immigrants.

Don: Don is an in-state student who lives 30 minutes away from Southeastern University. Don decided to attend the University because of ranking, location, and scholarships, "lots and lots of scholarships." For his senior thesis, Don plans on exploring identity politics, specifically contentious identities or non-traditional identities while factoring in race. Don started taking honors classes in the seventh grade and took AP courses in high school, providing him with the flexibility in college not to worry about fulfilling his major requirements. Don's high school was predominantly White as was his church, so college has been his first opportunity to explore his racial identity. Don is currently in a leadership position in a social justice and advocacy organization on campus. When he graduates from college, Don is interested in becoming a filmmaker and making socially conscious films. Don is a self-described perfectionist and has worked incredibly hard to achieve the best for himself.

4.2 Emergent Themes

Interviews were conducted with six high-achieving Black males at an honors college in a predominantly White public institution in the southeastern United States. Through these interviews, seven prominent themes surfaced: 1) the importance of faculty, staff, and student relationships, 2) involvement in civic engagement, social justice, and advocacy, 3) the role of advanced placement and international baccalaureate courses in preparing students for college, 4) the importance of personal and familial expectations, 5) the role of beyond the classroom opportunities in identity development, 6) lack of visibility and representation, and 7) navigation of stereotypes, microaggressions, and racism. These seven themes help us to understand the experiences of the population being studied and come together to help highlight the successes and challenges that this population may have experienced.

Faculty, staff, and student relationships

One of the most potent themes in these interviews was the importance of strong relationships between the participants and faculty and staff. This section will examine the impact that these relationships have had on participants' success in college, how these relationships were formed, and how participants perceive these relationships. Although faculty and staff play different roles in the college setting, this section will pair faculty and staff together because the interview participants used the phrases 'faculty and staff' interchangeably.

For the participants, faculty/staff at the university serve as resources, role models, and mentors. The study participants spoke about the role that faculty and staff played in connecting them with research opportunities, helping them find and apply for internships,

and pointing them towards additional scholarships. Charlie highlighted that when his mentors found him additional scholarships to apply for, he felt that they were "truly looking out for me at all times." Many of these mentor relationships have opened doors for these students and have ensured that they are pushed to their highest abilities. In describing his relationship with an upper level administrator, Kenny articulated the benefits of these relationships.

> She has been one of those people who has really encouraged me and pushed me to go out and seek multiple opportunities and to continually do things to better myself and she holds me accountable for that as I'm hoping she would as an Upper Level Administrator. That has been something that I've been fortunate to have – someone who is up there and is willing to hold me accountable to make sure that I'm doing the things that I need to do and want to do.

Through the interviews, it emerged that it is important to these students that faculty/staff support them, point them to opportunities and also hold them accountable to ensure that they follow through. These students have relationships with faculty and staff who believe in them enough to invest in them. Furthermore, the participants' faculty/staff mentors know them well enough to point them to resources and opportunities that are relevant to their passions and interests.

Many of the faculty members who were important to the success of the participants worked in the fields that the participants hoped to be in one day. Participants underlined that their faculty/staff mentors were helpful to them because they served as professional and personal role models. Patrick noted that his science advisor was able to not only help him pick the right science classes but also to provide him with "tips for

entering the workforce since [he'll] be heading there next year." In a similar fashion, Seth talked about the impact one of his professors has had on changing his career aspirations, "So I met her this semester for the first time, well actually I met her last semester for the first time, but I'm taking this class, and she's just been a really big inspiration for me and I'm hoping to go to her office hours next week to have a conversation with her about my future and about possibly going into public health. She's been a really huge inspiration this semester, like she sort of almost changed where I'm going with my career." These mentors have both advised the participants in their career choices and acted as professional role models. Seth described the impact of an interaction with one of his mentors, demonstrating the huge power these relationships have on these students' lives.

> I was actually talking to Dr. Redik one time about being busy and feeling discouraged, I was so tired, and she let me read the letter of recommendation that she wrote me, and I was almost in tears in her office. I'm really bad at accepting compliments, I've gotten better, but when academic professionals, like high up academic professionals praise me I just don't know how to handle it. Because you're doing what I hope to be doing one day and you see me as capable, and you see me as I have ability, and it's a lot for me honestly, it really does mean a lot for me when my faculty and staff relationships are good.

For many of these students, their mentors are professionals in their potential career field, and affirmations can mean a lot to their self-perception. This anecdote underscores the importance of creating a safe space where students feel comfortable and at the same time empowering students through support and encouragement.

Charlie pointed out that his mentors viewed their career paths in ways that he aspires to, "And he loves his job, and hopefully I'll get to a position where I love my job as much as he does… But he loves every second of being here." It has been critical for these students to see positive examples of people doing what they hope to do. These faculty and staff members don't just provide a model of positive characteristics, but they have also actively mentored the participants. Stewart was able to powerfully capture the importance of his relationships with faculty and staff, "I love my relationship with faculty members here, it's one of the most important things about university to me is the faculty-student relationship. I've kind of had mentors at various parts of my experience here, always cared about developing me as a person, and about developing me as a scholar.". The study participants highlighted that their faculty and staff mentors encouraged them, provided a safe space, demonstrated genuine care, and believed in them.

The mentoring relationships that the participants spoke about all developed organically. The participants highlighted three main student qualities and characteristics that they feel have led to relationships: 1) Curiosity about faculty and staff as people, 2) Desire to develop connections, and 3) Honors student status. Seth, Stewart, and Kenny noted that part of the reason that they have developed meaningful relationships with such a large array of faculty and staff is their curiosity about faculty and staff as people and their intellectual curiosity in general. Kenny captured this sentiment, explaining that

> The faculty members, each of them, everybody has their own story and how they got to be where they are. People don't really take the time to get to know the faculty and figure out what they're about and early on I decided I wanted to get to know the people who I'm investing in and who are investing in me. In doing that,

that opened up discussions into what people are interested in and a lot of times I'll find out that I have a similar interest as them. So that typically leads to me getting involved and working with them.

In this way, the mentor/mentee relationship stems from an understanding on the part of the participants that faculty and staff are more than their titles, that they are people with interests and backstories.

The mentor/mentee relationship relies on students to take the initiative. Seth explained that while he loves his relationships with faculty/staff and faculty/staff have shown a genuine care for his success, he feels it is his responsibility to put time and energy into these relationships. "I always know that they're going to make an effort, but for me they're reaching out, but it's the students responsibility to make it happen." Students have a choice in whether they want to be mentored by faculty and staff. The participant who had not invested in his relationships with faculty and staff did state that he had a solid relationship with his advisor and could go to him for any help, but explained that he's, "not really the kind of student that's like, I need to be in the professor's face all the time. So like, I guess I'll generally ask questions and what not but for the most part I try to keep it professional if that makes sense." While this perspective has not led this participant to any clear-cut negatives, one could argue that he has missed out on the benefits of having a mentor.

Finally, Stewart noted that he felt that the expectations that come along with being an Honors College student made faculty and staff feel that he had the qualities they might want in a mentee. In response to the question, "What aspects of the Honors College have

contributed most to your success?" Stewart answered, "Probably proximity to professors, they already have an idea that "you have the qualities I want in a mentee or a student". Stewart suggested that by virtue of being an Honors College student and being associated with positive expectations, faculty/staff were inclined to work with him on co-curricular activities like research or study abroad.

When asked about what institutional factors contributed to their success, the majority of the participants pointed to specific faculty/staff. It follows that faculty/staff truly have the power to support high-achieving Black males in achieving their personal and professional goals.

Civic Engagement, Social Justice, and Advocacy

When the participants were asked what they are involved in, five of the six participants highlighted their extensive experiences with civic engagement, social justice, and advocacy. The motivations each participant felt to get involved with civic engagement, social justice, and advocacy differ, as does their level of involvement. That being said, five of the participants felt it was important for them to have a positive impact on the community and world around them and have taken actions to make a difference.

After being asked, "what are you involved in?" Kenny responded, "I would say everything. Put a circle around everything." Kenny's involvements in service organizations are expansive, to the extent that he won a national award that recognizes student leaders for their service, research and advocacy. Kenny was president of multiple service organizations and exudes a passion for impacting students through education. Kenny also performed community-engaged research to explore best practices for peer-to-

peer mentoring of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Kenny explained that he has had mentors throughout his life and wants to provide the same guidance to younger students.

> I think that knowing the amount of need we have just in [Southeastern City], which is in the grand scheme of things such a small area, and knowing there is so much need, and a lack of people devoting time to that makes me that much more passionate to do it. I always tell people that when I was growing up I had mentors. Every where I turned there was someone wanting to invest their time in helping me achieve my goals and when I look around or if I go to a school and see a child who's struggling and I ask who is helping you and they say, "well, nobody" that really just tugs at my heart and makes me want to be more deeply invested in helping in any way that I can, whether it's tutoring or spending any time that I can, any way that I can help them so that they too can understand that there's someone invested in their future so they want to invest in their own future. So that's the biggest thing for me, knowing that there is need there and I am able to help provide a solution for that need we have in Southeastern City.

Kenny articulated a p that was present in the experiences of the other participants interviewed – they see a social issue or a need and have the drive and qualities necessary to make a positive change. Similarly, Charlie believes he will be successful in life if he can help people and give back. "Truly what motivates me the most is I really want to go to medical school, and I really want to take whatever I do after college and I want to help people. If I'm successful I believe I can give back the most – so that's one of the main reasons that I try so hard." Like Kenny, Charlie is the president of a major service

organization at Southeastern University and is a committed member to a long list of

service organizations that benefit the community through direct service. In his interview,

Charlie described his belief that if everyone put in effort to help those around them, it

would make the world a better place. Charlie explained that he is involved with so many

service organizations because it is important to him to lead by example.

Don and Seth both discussed their involvements with social justice movements

and advocacy. Both students are deeply invested in a social justice organization on

campus, have sharp eyes for structural and societal issues in the community and at the

national level, and have a desire to make a positive impact in their communities. Don

described how the events surrounding the Michael Brown controversy motivated him

towards action.

> [Social justice organization] is probably the most important to me right now.
> When it started, when the seeds were planted was back last year when Michael
> Brown was killed by Darren Wilson and that story was blowing up and there was
> a hundred days, a little over a hundred before Darren Wilson was even put on
> trial. So that was a lot of anxiety, tension, and worry and when that decision
> finally came out that he was not even indicted let alone you know, punished for
> his actions, that caused a lot of negative feelings in me and a lot of other people. I
> went to a couple demonstrations right after that, and I think that was one of my
> first experiences with activism and with being involved in a central movement
> rather than just being on Tumblr and being informed about social movements and
> social stuff. So that, recognizing the injustices in the world and having that hope
> that I can do something about it and fix it, it started a fire in me that keeps

burning, and then it flickers sometimes, it's not always easy, but it helps me a lot with negotiating and resisting negative messages about gay people about black people, about other racial ethnic groups, about other sexual orientations and gender identities and marginalized identities.

As he articulated in his interview, events in the world acted as a catalyst for Don to pursue involvement in a social justice organization and to become an activist in his local community. In their interviews, it became apparent that these students view activism, social justice, and civic engagement as a positive way to navigate the complicated and often troubling issues that arise in the United States. In a variety of different ways, these students have paid attention to the needs around them and have worked to create positive change in nuanced and sensitive ways.

The Transition to College

This section will explore the reasons that participants attended Southeastern University and their transition into the University. Among the participants interviewed for this study, the top reasons for attending the Honors College were location, price/scholarships offered, ranking, a feeling that it was the right fit, and a desire to pursue their intellectual curiosity. In response to the question, "What factors led to your decision to go to the Honors College?" Don summarized these factors:

[The University] is close to my home town… it's just like an hour and 30, 40 minutes away. Like far enough away from home but close enough that if I need to go back, it's there. Scholarships, lots and lots of scholarships. And I toured the campus a couple of times and it felt really good to me, and I guess also that [The

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University] has the number one Honors College in the nation, which didn't hurt."

In Stewart's interview he spoke to his desire to learn, "Coming in here I just wanted to pursue my intellectual curiosity while enjoying myself, and meeting new people, and pursuing my dreams so to speak." Once again, the participants in this study chose a path that would help support their learning and education.

All six men categorized their transition to college as seamless, and several of the men explained that their first years at Southeastern University were easier than their high schools. All six men felt academically prepared for the work and five of the men interviewed attributed the ease of their transition to the rigor of their high schools along with enrollment in gifted programming and then in International Baccalaureate (IB) and/or Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Four out of the five men who attended public or magnet high schools attended schools that ranked in the top ten public high schools according to *U.S. News and World Report*. Two of those five men attended schools that were ranked in the top 25 public and magnate schools nationally and had college readiness scores of above 95%. The sixth student interviewed attended an independent school in South Carolina that has won multiple National Blue Ribbon School awards from the US Department of Education. Only one of the men interviewed attended a school in South Carolina that was unranked nationally and on the state level that had a relatively low college readiness index. The participants in this study attended high schools that were invested in their success and accomplished at preparing students for college. However, the majority of the participants had to navigate the education system to

attend those schools.

Many of the men interviewed, along with their families, were intentional in choosing to attend rigorous high schools with a high educational quality. From moving districts, to applying to magnet schools to attending a private institution, these student and their families successfully navigated a complex education system to receive a high quality education. Patrick's family moved to a specific area so that he could enroll in a rigorous high school; "My parents really care about education and they wanted me to get the best education possible, which is why we moved to the area we did and I was able to go to a school like Rigorous School." Similarly, Kenny decided to apply to a magnet school instead of following the path that was laid out before him. According to Kenny, "My home high school, the school that I would have fed into, was a failing school and I knew that I would not have been challenged or able to get the experiences that I wanted out of high school. So, I applied to a magnet school in Southeastern City, one of our only magnet schools that focuses on academics and is described as being rigorous." The majority of the students interviewed came from families that prioritized their education and ensured that their children would have access to high quality education. Stewart's explanation of why he attended an independent school depicts this well.

> I went to private school. You know, my mother was a physician, she was college educated, she paid for my private school education on her own and you know, she pushed for that instead of public school, which you saw the prospects of blacks in public schools, especially of blacks in public schools in Southeastern City, which is like, our education system is pretty awful and bleak.

Many of these students' parents were dedicated to their sons' educational pursuits, ensuring that they would not only succeed in high school, but also in college. Taken together, these stories highlight that the participants were able to succeed because their families were able to capitalize on successful schools and avoid schools without resources or rigor. While this is a positive for the students interviewed, it speaks volumes that these families had to put in such tremendous efforts to provide their sons with high quality educations.

Personal and Familial Expectations

One theme that emerged at different points in each interview was the strong presence of personal and/or familial expectations for each of the men. The participants commented on their emotions regarding these expectations and the ways that they have gone about trying to fulfill these expectations. The six men interviewed all spoke to having high expectations for themselves both academically and personally. Many of the interviewees explained that success has stemmed from a desire to be the best in school and that success in the future equates to thriving and achieving highly in their careers. Don shared that for him, "success is not an achievement, success is mandatory, success is compulsory." The participants expect to succeed academically and professionally, to give back, and to act as role models for others, and to do so through their drive, hard work, and intellectual curiosity.

For Seth and Stewart, one of their greatest expectations for themselves is to learn and to be intellectually curious. Stewart explained that the expectations from his family were to, "do well, study, be curious, make As, and be kind, all of the general humanist

ethics, and behavioral suggestions, recommendations, commands." When discussing the expectations Stewart had for himself, he said:

> I wanted to make all As, I wanted to have the best grades in my entire grade. I didn't want anyone to score higher than me. You know, I wanted to be a doctor, I knew I wanted to be a doctor since second grade, because my mom was a physician so she gave me these biology books, and theses other science books, and you know I was just curious about nature and about human health so I would just ferociously and veraciously consume every bit of literature or watch a documentary (I didn't know they were documentaries at the time) but it was just like watch a show on Discovery Channel, or Animal Planet or History Channel or something like that. Because that's what I wanted. I liked that.

Stewart explained that the quality of being curious links back to his mother who transmitted a curiosity and love of continuous learning to Stewart. In this way, it appears that the expectation to be curious played out in Stewart's research, involvement, study abroad experience, and senior thesis among other venues. Similarly, Seth shared that one of his personal expectations is to soak up as much knowledge as possible while at college. Seth explained, "Now millennials are just focused on getting degrees so that they can get a job. And I'm not saying that I'm a special snowflake for it, but I'm not here to get a job, I'm here to get an education… to set myself up for my future." Seth and Stewart both conveyed a great value placed on learning and it is clear that they both see the importance in learning for the sake of learning. This desire to learn has aided them in developing relationships with faculty/staff and in engaging in beyond the classroom opportunities.

Charlie and Patrick shared that their family's expectation for them is to serve as a role model for their siblings and cousins. Patrick discussed that his parents have high expectations for him and joke about him setting the bar high for his younger siblings. He described that this was "Kind of nice. Setting the bar for the rest of your siblings. I've been successful, but I want my siblings, I want everyone else after me to be successful as well." Charlie also explained that his family looked towards him as a role model for his cousins. Charlie shared:

> I'm the oldest and the one that's been told by multiple family members that I'm the role model, which terrifies me so much, but I'm the person that a lot of people look up to or I'm the person that a lot of people in my family put as a bar for their kids which also terrifies me, and I'm just trying to make sure that I make it to their expectations of me.

One of Charlie's motivations is that he wants to set the bar for his younger family members, "I want them to be better then me so I want to put the bar high, so that they can reach it and surpass it." In the previous section, there was a discussion of faculty/staff as mentors and role models, but the participants are not only mentees they are also mentors and role models for others. In this way, the participants have the opportunity to see the characteristics of a positive role model, and then to in turn practice those same characteristics themselves.

Don, Patrick, and Charlie each talked about how their high expectations for themselves have pushed them to work hard and seek perfection. They highlighted that they will work as hard as they possibly can in an effort to get things "right". Don went

into detail about the benefits and challenges of his perfectionism and high expectations. He explained that, "my studies have always been first, top priority for me. Working really hard, expecting nothing less than the best for myself." Because of his high expectations Don has achieved academic success. However, Don also shared that his high expectations, perfectionism and work ethic have had negative effects.

> So it used to be [Don's idea of success] based a lot on really high expectations and really air tight, heartless expectations. There wasn't a whole lot of room for how I'm feeling or what I want because this goal I set out for myself I'm going to do it by whatever means necessary and if that means that I'm only going to get four hours of sleep one night or if that means I have to kill myself in the gym or if that means winding myself up everyday when I don't really feel like it, and I'm like, "who am I even doing this for?"

Don's discussion of his push to achieve highlights the immense challenges that come along with high expectations and perfectionism. Success can come along with intense pressure and tireless work. So while perfectionism can have positive outcomes, it can also have negative effects.

The men interviewed for this study have tremendous expectations for themselves and day in and day out work tirelessly to achieve these expectations. These men expect to achieve highly, to give back, to have financial stability, career/grad school success, academic achievement, and happiness and they are working hard to achieve these goals.

Identity Development

In this section, I will explore how the Black undergraduate males in this study perceived their own identities and their identity development. It is important to note that this group of men is by no means monolithic. These men come from different backgrounds and have different intersecting identities that are of various degrees of importance to them. Additionally, four of the men interviewed for this study have spent a tremendous amount of time intentionally exploring and reflecting upon their identity development, while two have not, creating a spectrum of depth in response to interview questions. For example, Don explained that his identity development took a lot of "leg work", effort, and emotional energy. In contrast, Patrick and Charlie noted that while their racial identity is important to them, because it is a part of them, they "don't really think about it too often" and neither of them felt that their identity had changed since coming to college.

The four men who were able to articulate their identity development had explored their identity through involvement in cultural and identity based student organizations, and through research and the senior thesis. This section will focus on the impact that involvement in student organizations, leadership opportunities, and the senior thesis have had on the identity development of the participants. This section will also touch on the participants' attitudes about attending a predominantly white institution (PWI).

One theme that emerged through the interviews was that four of the six interview participants actively explored their identities through involvement in outside the classroom experiences like student organizations, study abroad, and research. Interestingly, four of the six participants attended predominantly white institutions in k-

12 and so even though Southeastern University is a predominantly White institution,

college was the first time that they were able to truly explore their various identities. Don

articulated this sentiment by sharing a story of his involvement with an all black play at

Southeastern University.

> I was able to get involved in a play with an all black cast right as I got there. That
>
> was my first experience being in a black space, because my parents raised me to
>
> be – just be Don, you don't have to be black you don't have to be mixed, just be
>
> Don, which was fine and that's the way they wanted to raise me and there's
>
> nothing wrong with that but I wish they had exposed me more to what being black
>
> is and my dad's side of the family and go to black things, because you know our
>
> church is predominantly white and my schools were predominantly white, I wish I
>
> had more of an opportunity to explore my race identity before coming to college.
>
> But, it's been great since I've been here.

For Don, college has presented an opportunity for him to explore his identity. He has

actively pursued involvements where he has been able to reflect on what his identity

means to him and to society. Due to his involvements, Don has been able to reflect on

how he interacts with his identities and his intersectaionlity.

> Stewart shared that his involvement in cultural and international organizations

allowed him to explore his identity and to navigate negative stereotypes.

> A lot of my experiences jumping from one cultural organization to another was
>
> about finding my identity and self-esteem. You've got stereotypes of like African

American males not being intelligent or bringing anything to the table that's

exceptional when it comes to intellectual development of a culture or a

perspective of a certain social concept or scientific skill, etc, so these types of

things wear on you…and it erodes at your self esteem. In my case, I had literally

like I came here at 17 so you have 17 years of that narrative, and you really feel

like you have to prove yourself, you really have low self-esteem, so just being

around these international organizations, studying abroad in Tapei and Beijing,

meeting people who are affirming that I'm smart or creative made a huge

difference and made me stop caring. Once I had that validation it freed me, kind

of liberated me to feel worth something in a sense. It was an important journey

but I wish it wasn't a journey that I had to go through like I would really if it

wasn't necessary I would have just devoted that time to something else. But

knowing about yourself is really important too."

This anecdote demonstrates the impact that involvement can have on identity exploration

and developing comfort in one's identity.

Four of the participants shared that they viewed certain student organizations as

venues to help them explore their identity. Two of the participants shared that the GSA at

Southeastern University helped them to develop a sense of community with other people

who are LGBTQ. Additionally, two participants discussed their involvement with a

feminist organization on campus as a venue to help them explore and develop their

identities as feminists. By exploring their different identities these two students have

developed an understanding of how their feminism intersects with their sexuality and

their race. These two participants also explored identity further in their Senior Thesis. To provide a brief context, the senior thesis is an element of the Honors College that gives students the opportunity to dive into a subject and chose both the style of research and the method for presenting that research. The senior thesis represents one more opportunity that students have to explore their identities in whatever way they see fit.

Southeastern University has multiple opportunities for students to explore their identity, whether it be through interacting with students similar or different from themselves. However, the decision to engage in those opportunities is up to the students. For four of the students in this study, their involvement in college has changed the way that they perceive themselves and the way that they view their interactions with others.

Challenges

In this section, I will explore how the Black undergraduate males in this study experienced, navigated and responded to lack of visibility in the student body, faculty and staff; and coursework; microaggressions; stereotypes; and racism within the University setting. Just as these students are not monolithic in their identities, their responses to challenges vary greatly, but are each deserving of attention.

Despite the largely positive experiences the participants have had in the Honors College, one challenge that all participants faced was the underrepresentation and lack of visibility of Black males in the student body, in faculty and staff roles, and of black voices in their coursework. When describing how they felt about the lack of representation, participants used words like jarring, daunting, disconnecting, alone, and

inherent otherness. This section will explore how Black males in the Honors College

perceive this lack of representation and how it has affected their experience.

Many of the students interviewed described that the lack of visibility in the

student body creates a feeling of otherness. Three of the interviewees described the

feelings associated with being one of the only Black faces in a classroom, in their walk

across campus or in a residence hall floor. Seth painted a picture of this experience'

> In society in general, there's an inherent otherness to being Black but I think it's
>
> highlighted for me since I've started coming to this university. Because you
>
> notice, I mean walking to class or walking across [The Bridge]. I walk across that
>
> bridge every single day and all I see are white faces.

Just as important as the lack of representation itself is the impact it has on the

experiences of Black male students. For some, the experience of being one of the only

Black males can make it hard to connect with other students or to relate to the

experiences of other students. As Stewart explained,

> When you don't have any community of African-Americans it's difficult to relate
>
> to some of the other students, honestly. And at this time in your life you're
>
> finding your identity and that can be really difficult if you don't have people
>
> around you that share similar backgrounds, to you, not like everyone but just like
>
> more.

Many of the other participants also described the experience of being the only Black

student. They highlighted that it can be disconnecting when they walk into a class and

nobody looks like them.

Two of the men interviewed shared that the only time throughout their experience at college that they have seen themselves represented was during their community service experiences. Seth commented on the shock of seeing a heavily black community during one of his service-learning classes.

> It's really messed up, but the only place I've ever seen myself in my classes is my service-learning class and that's only because I was not expecting the homeless population of Southeastern City to be so heavily black. I wasn't expecting that.

One of the benefits of service-learning courses is that it exposes students to different populations and creates an appreciation of diversity. Southeastern University is a predominantly White university, situated near communities that are predominantly Black and living in poverty. Seth's observation poses a deeper question about the impact of "diversity" lessons on Black students as opposed to White students.

The six men interviewed also shared that while they felt the Honors College staff is diverse, they felt that there was a lack of Black faculty members. The men interviewed noted that lack of representation among faculty members negatively impacts the experiences of students. One student noted that this lack of representation in faculty "makes a very big difference in how students thrive and succeed." In response to the question, "what does it mean to be a Black man at a predominantly white institution," one participant offered a series of questions to consider when thinking about whether campus is inclusive, "just in general look, look at your humanities departments. How many faculty in the humanities departments are black? Or like, are all of your black professors in Af-Am. How many of your STEM professors are black?" Interestingly, the participants

responded to the lack of representation within faculty in a matter of fact and detached way.

With more emotion behind their voices, three of the students interviewed discussed their feelings surrounding not seeing Black experiences and bodies of work (literature, arts, theories, etc.) represented in their coursework. Two of the students interviewed are science majors and didn't delve into representation in the science curriculum. The three students who have taken a substantial number of humanities courses explained that they see representation in African-American classes but not in their other humanities classes. One student stressed that English classes promote reading "dead white guys" rather than Black writers. Similarly, another student captured the experience of seeing White authors favored in the curriculum over Black authors.

> As far as structural road blocks, I'd say – I wouldn't say it's a small thing, but it's definitely not easy to pin – it's like a lack of visibility in classrooms and course material of people who look like me, who sound like me, things like that. A lack of inclusion of Black people, especially in humanities spaces. I love humanities classes but like the only time we get to talk about African-American history is in African-American Studies classes, or the only time we talk about Black writers is in Af-Am departments, the only time we talk about queer writers is in Women and Gender Studies departments so like, you know we want to take classes like British Literature and American Literature and all that good stuff, but like Langston Hughes is an American author, Audre Lorde is an American author but the only people who are considered classic writers are people like Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and don't even get me started on

Ernest Hemingway. But like, it's ridiculous because we want to talk about how

we can't read Maya Angelou because it's so grammatically wishy-washy,

meanwhile Mark Twain can write an entire book of grammatical errors and we

consider it an American classic – obviously that's a manifestation of privilege.

But try to explain that to people and they just don't see it – it gets really

exhausting not seeing yourself in your classes.

Representation in the staff, faculty, student body, and curriculum is an important step in

creating a campus climate that is welcoming to all students. The lack of representation is

a manifestation of a society that favors one population over another and it is impacting

the experiences of these students (and all students) negatively. Using representation in

literature as an example, it is not only problematic to favor White authors over Black

authors for issues of cultural representation in coursework, but students across the board

are also missing out on thought-provoking and emotion-provoking literature.

Stereotypes, Microaggressions, and Racism

There is no debate that the United States is still a country that struggles with

rampant stereotyping, microaggressions, and racism. This section does not attempt to

prove that. This section aims to explore the spectrum of participant perceptions on racism

and the impact of navigating a racist society. Just as each participant's background,

experiences, and identities are vastly different from one another, so were there

experiences with and perceptions of stereotypes, microaggressions, and racism.

In the six interviews, there was a large spectrum in how deeply participants had

grappled with these issues prior to the interviews. If anything, this section highlights that

this is not a monolithic group, and that each individual has their own unique lived experiences and responds to those experiences in vastly different ways. The best example of this involves the reactions of two of the participants to being called White. Stewart discussed his reactions to being told that he "talks white,"

> People being like, you talk white…it's one of the most racist things you can say because it really shows that you have a concept of what Blackness can be or what Blackness can't be and they think that someone who's Black would want to imitate Whiteness or to be White, or anything else…if someone says "hey Stewart, why do you act so White?" From that point on I'm not going to feel comfortable hanging out with that person, because it kind of like forces an isolation.

In comparison, Charlie shared that when people have called him an Oreo he took it as a funny nickname. It took an explanation from his aunt for Charlie to understand that someone could potentially view the term as hurtful, although he still does not take offense. This example demonstrates the variety of perspective that the participants hold. Some of the participants are looking at things through a similar lens to Critical Race Theory – they are acknowledging that race and racism are at the core of society, and they are taking active steps to dismantle that racism. However, two of the participants viewed the experiences of Black males in the education system through a deficit perspective, actively blaming individuals and communities.

The participants each talked about the varying degrees of impact stereotypes, racism, and microaggressions have had on them. These students have experienced these

negative messages, attitudes and actions through their entire lives, and three of the

participants talked about the impact this has had on them. Seth shared his experiences

with people being surprised by his intellect as a child, and how this impacted him.

> When I was like 8 and I was in elementary school and I was a gifted student, they
>
> would say to my parents, "Oh my god, your son is so smart" and "oh my god your
>
> son is so intelligent" and something about it threw me off, I just couldn't put the
>
> words to it back then. But looking back it was like they were really enthralled
>
> with my intelligence because I'm black, because black people, especially black
>
> males are not supposed to be intelligent and so here I come "defying stereotypes"
>
> and it threw people off. It really threw me off that people were thrown off by my
>
> intelligence… It felt really othering, is a good word to use, like it said it was like
>
> they were surprised by something that was a normal trait that was expected of me
>
> because my parents, it's what they expected of me so that's what it was, so when
>
> other people were always like, oh my god, I was just like am I not supposed to be
>
> this? Why is this a big deal?

Seth beautifully captured his reaction to negative expectations people had of him, and the

impact of their surprise. This anecdote demonstrates that particpants have encountered

and navigated stereotypes and mismatched expectations throughout their entire lives.

Stewart also discussed the impact that interacting with negative stereotypes over the

course of time has had on him.

> You've got stereotypes of like African American males not being intelligent or
>
> bringing anything to the table that's exceptional when it comes to intellectual
>
> development of a culture or a perspective of a certain social concept or scientific

skill, etc, so these types of things wear on you…and it erodes at your self esteem. In my case, I had literally like I came here at 17 so you have 17 years of that narrative, and you really feel like you have to prove yourself.

Stewart's discussion highlights the negative impact that years of hearing negative stereotypes can have.

Kenny and Patrick talked minimally about their experiences with racism and stereotypes but both described situations in which they were walking across campus late at night and people responded to them with fear or accusation. In Patrick's case, he described a situation where a girl responded to his presence with fear. "A couple of years ago, I was walking at night and some random girl just like jumped out when I walked right by her. I was just like, "Woah, I'm just walking," but I was spooked. I don't know if it was because I'm a Black male or what but that always sticks out in my head." Kenny shared an experience where he was walking from class and was stopped by the police:

I was at a night class and I was giving a presentation that night and I was leaving from a class, and a group of my friends and I were leaving and it was specifically me and four other people. I was talking with one of my best friends who is also a black male and a couple friends were ahead of us, they were not black. We were walking from the nursing building, it was about 9:00 at night, we had been there a while, just talking, and one of the [campus police] stopped us and asked, ya know, what are you doing? Why are you here this late? Do you go to University? And all that. You know I was just so appalled that I couldn't say anything.

A campus community cannot be inclusive, welcoming, and a safe space for Black males when they are being stopped on their way home from class. A sense of belonging is critical to success in college, and yet, these students are being asked why they are on campus.

The majority of the participants shared how they react when someone uses a microaggression, stereotype, or engages in an overtly racist act. The participants shared that as a response to offensive acts they will engage in conversation, remove themselves from the situation, will "laugh it off" or will want to say something but won't. Seth described that in situations where people say something offensive, but he feels it's impossible to educate them, he'll remove himself from the situation. However, if someone is coming from a place of misunderstanding then he'll engage with them. While it's beneficial for his peers that Seth is willing to educate them, it's unfair that he should need to spend any time or energy engaging with hurtful comments and/or actions. Stewart shared that when he encounters microaggressions and racism he doesn't want to come across as overly defensive, and so doesn't necessarily say anything. Stewart also talked about his confusion over how people couldn't understand the hurtfulness of language; "It should be obvious that this type of thing hurt another person, like what do you do when someone doesn't have that type of sensitivity, how can you change that?" In these situations, the participants in this study are spending their time and energy trying to think about how to thoughtfully and gracefully respond to hurtful and ignorant comments.

The participants in this study have each succeeded in college despite being forced to navigate stereotypes, microaggressions, and overt racism. On one hand their college

experiences have taught them to explore their identities, to be curious, and to be leaders, however, on the other hand, this same community can be isolating, unwelcoming, and hurtful. The participants in this study are receiving mixed messages – they are supported by faculty and staff, and are thriving members of the campus community, and yet they are being stopped and asked, "What are you doing? Why are you here?".

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The following questions helped to guide this research study:

1. What factors have led to the success of Black males in honors colleges and how
   do these students perceive their success?

2. What challenges have Black males in honors colleges faced and how have they
   navigated these challenges?

3. What are the common experiences of Black males in honors colleges?

5.1 Discussion and Analysis

This section will provide a discussion and analysis of research results in this
study. Each guiding research question will be discussed with attention to the seven
emergent themes highlighted in this study and the relevant literature.

**Research Question One: What factors have led to the success of Black males in
honors colleges and how do these students perceive their success?**

The students interviewed for this study have successfully navigated the K-12
system and have experienced success and achievement in an honors college at the
undergraduate level. This section will attempt to shine a light on the internal and external
reasons that these students feel that they have been successful in the education system.
Additionally, this section will highlight how these students defined success. The
participants noted that their success stemmed from preparation for college, familial and

personal expectations, relationships with faculty and staff, and engagement outside the classroom.

The participants in this study contribute their successful transition into and through college to the preparation they received in high school and their high familial and personal expectations. All six participants credited their enrollment in AP/IB courses with helping to prepare them academically. This finding highlights the importance of advanced high school coursework in preparing students for college level coursework. Unfortunately, on a national scale, Black male students are significantly underrepresented in advanced placement courses and in schools that offer advanced placement courses. The success the students in this study have had in college and have contributed to their high school shines a harsh light on the underrepresentation of Black males in AP courses. 3 out of 10 Black students who have the potential to succeed in AP coursework actually enroll in AP classes. Additionally, Solorzano and Ornelas (2004) discovered "at the California state level, Latina/o and African American students are less likely to be in the top 50 AP high schools" (p.19). Once again, in contrast, four of the six students in this study attended high schools that are top-ten high schools in their home state, and two high schools that are ranked in the top 25 nationally. This finding emphasizes the importance of quality education at the k-12 level and the need for equal access to advanced coursework for all students. The students in this study had access to coursework and resources and were able to capitalize on their access to opportunity.

The students in this study also highlighted that during their k-12 educations, they were tracked into honors programming. One student emphasized that because he was in honors programming, it was a natural progression to take AP courses. Once again, the

experiences of these students can be viewed in sharp contrast to the literature. Minority and low-income students are disproportionality assigned to lower tracks, even when controlled for achievement. Tracking has been deemed a modern day form of segregation. The students in this study were able to attend rigorous schools with curricular resources because their families moved to different school districts and enrolled them in magnet and private schools. One of the students attended a private institution, two of the students applied to and enrolled in magnate schools, and two students moved to districts with higher quality schools. The students in this study had the exceptional motivation, determination and support needed to navigate the educational system. The stories of the students in this study underscore the importance of familial emphasis on education. However, not all students have the resources or ability to move and apply to different schools to be successful. There is a clear problem in a system where students must avoid attending their local school to become successful. All schools should prepare students for college, and the ability to navigate the education system should not be the determinant for being successful. Students should not have to navigate the system; the system should work in their favor.

While in the Honors College the students in this study contributed their success to their relationships with faculty/staff and highlighted their engagement in organizations as a mark of their success. This finding is in line with the themes that emerged from the anti-deficit research on high-achieving Black males. The students interviewed, contributed the formation of strong relationships to their interest in faculty/staff as people, their desire to develop connections, and their status as honors college students. This finding is similar to Sharon Fries-Britt's (1997) findings in her study of high-

achieving Black males, which argued that relationships between faculty and students stemmed from the academic abilities of the students and the reputation of their program. Additionally, the interviews highlighted the presence of a virtuous cycle in which relationships with faculty/staff lead students to participate in more opportunities, and this participation leads students to develop more relationships with faculty/staff. Shaun Harper's work mirrors this finding and emphasizes that engagement led students to strong relationships with faculty, staff and upper level administrators. The students in this study emphasized that their faculty and staff mentors have pointed them to scholarships, jobs, and research opportunities. Both Harper and Bonner have found similar findings that point to the role of faculty/staff in helping students pursue additional scholarships and pointing students to opportunities they might not otherwise have. The students pointed to faculty/staff as contributing factors to their success. This higlihgts the immense power that faculty/staff can have to positively impact students.

The findings in this study also point to the positive impact that relationships with faculty and staff have had on the satisfaction and success of the students in this study. In a similar study, Thomas Herbert highlighted that the participants in the study "indicated that the guidance of supportive adults beyond their families was essential to their academic success and reinforced their motivation to achieve." The students in this study pointed to their faculty/staff mentors as people who believed in them, supported them, held them accountable, and ensured that they reached their goals. Kenny captured this beautifully when he stated, "That has been something that I've been fortunate to have – someone who is up there and is willing to hold me accountable to make sure that I'm doing the things that I need to do and want to do". The faculty and staff have acted as

mentors, role models, and resources and in turn the students in this study have acted as mentors, role models, and resources for their peers. The participants explained that part of their success stems from personal characteristics like perfectionism, a hard work ethic, high expectations, intellectual curiosity and association with a prestigious program.

When discussing their success in college, all of the participants pointed to their engagement on and off campus. In Strayhorn's study, he found a link between engagement and academic success. The research points to a strong correlation between outside the classroom experiences and engagement and in the class learning. In this study, it is apparent that all six students were involved in outside the classroom activities ranging from study abroad, to research, to peer leadership that contributed to their satisfaction at college and in the classroom. Furthermore, in this study five of the six participants described that for them, being able to positively impact their communities and society as a whole would make them successful.

Research Question Two: What challenges have Black males in honors colleges faced and how have they navigated these challenges?

The students in this study identified a variety of challenges that they have faced including lack of visibility and representation, interactions with stereotyping, microaggressions, and racism, and impact of navigating challenges on mental health. The two major points that emerged in discussion about navigating challenges was that the participants' perceived challenges in different ways, responded to challenges in vastly different ways, and reflected on structural challenges in varying degrees.

As this study evolved, it became less about students navigating challenges and more about students striving for success. While the research protocol did expose the

challenges the participants faced, and the emergent themes demonstrate room for growth in campus climate, this thesis is far more about these students successes than their challenges. The literature base already has documented the challenges of Black males in institutions of higher education, and so at this point, a discussion of the participants' successes proves to be more valuable than a discussion of their challenges.

What are the common experiences of Black males in honors colleges?

One of the biggest take-aways from this research study was that although the participants did have common experiences, their perceptions about these experiences were drastically different. The majority of research focuses on Black students as a monolithic group, without exploring the nuance created by intersecting identities and without focusing on gender and achievement. Even in this study, which focused on race and gender, the experiences of the study participants were hugely different from one another. That being said, the seven themes that emerged in this study highlight the common experiences of Black males. To summarize, the participants in this study identified 1) the importance of faculty, staff, and student relationships 2) involvement in civic engagement, social justice, and advocacy 3) the role of advanced placement and international baccalaureate courses in preparing students for college 4) the importance of personal and familial expectations 5) the role of beyond the classroom opportunities in identity development 6) lack of visibility and representation 7) navigation of stereotypes, microaggressions, and racism. In looking at these themes, three broader commonalities surfaced.

First, the participant's involvements in outside the classroom activities aided in the participants' ability to make an impact on their university community as well as the

surrounding community. The current research base focuses so greatly on the retention and graduation rates of Black males, and while those statistics and numbers are important, merely "getting through college" should not be enough. The students in this study are not just receiving a degree, they are all making significant and positive changes to the world around them. They are using their strengths to make a difference and to leave a legacy. For example, all six participants have participated in some type of research and this research has the potential to contribute to their various fields in tremendous ways. The participants are not only learning while at college they are contributing to their fields. Student affairs professionals and faculty have a responsibility to help support them towards this end.

Second, these students have high expectations for themselves and have been supported by the high expectations of family members and faculty and staff. At various points in their educations, these students have strived to be the best that they could be. In turn, I would hypothesize that when faculty and staff interact with students that meet their high expectations, it sets a higher bar for students that will come after. This thesis aims to communicate the importance of high and realistic expectations. The students in this study had people around them that believed in them – believed that they could achieve great things, and they did.

Finally, college can be a time of great exploration. Many times, college represents the first time that students have the ability to interact with those different from them and in some cases similar to them. Students have the capacity to gain a better understanding of how their identities are perceived and how they interact with their various identities. Student organizations, study abroad, and research mark three venues that students in this

study used to explore their identities. It is imperative that institutions continue to help students reflect on who they are, what is important to them, and how their identities intersect. Furthermore, in an ideal world institutions would have faculty, staff, and curriculum that represent the array of identities represented in the student population to best support identity exploration.

5.2 Implications and Recommendations

All students, regardless or race or gender, should have equal access to quality education at all levels. In 1896, the decision in Plessy v. Ferguson was to accept a practice of separate but equal treatment, services, and institutions. Access to quality education in Black schools and White schools was not equal. Despite the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark ruling in 1954 to desegregate public schools, access to quality education for Black students is still not equal. That being said, the students in this study were able to successfully navigate the K-12 education system and thrive in an honors college setting. Their stories and successes shine a light on a variety of ways that higher education and student affairs professionals can help to support this population. Based on the six interviews conducted, I have outlined three recommendations.

Additional Research and Communication of Research

Additional research on high-achieving Black males at the university level is needed to educate K-12 teachers, and faculty and staff about how best to support this population. Given the need for research on high-achieving undergraduate Black males, there are a multitude of opportunities for future research. The specific study in this thesis could be expanded in both sample size and time frame. With unlimited resources it would be beneficial to expand this study to additional honors colleges housed in predominantly

white institutions. It might also be interesting to do a longitudinal study of the experiences of Black males. It would provide great insight to interview high-achieving Black males at various ages and levels of education.

There are three different directions that this research could go in that would contribute significantly to the literature base. It would be helpful to have a greater understanding of the impact of the honors colleges as a structure on the experiences of undergraduate Black males. To this end, it would be useful to perform a comparative study of the experiences of high-achieving Black males in honors colleges at predominantly white institutions and the experiences of high-achieving Black males in predominantly white institutions but not in honors colleges. This study would also help to highlight what practices serve high-achieving Black males best. Additionally, this study could unearth the reasons that a high-achieving Black male might enroll in the general University rather than the honors college. This study would help fill the gap in the literature regarding the impact of honors colleges on undergraduate students in general.

One of the major findings of this study was the impact that enrollment in AP/IB and gifted programs can have on the experiences of undergraduate students. This study highlighted that 1)AP/IB courses are large factors in admission and preparation to competitive universities 2) Black males are underrepresented in AP/IB courses 3) The students in this study all enrolled in AP/IB courses and contributed their ease in transition to their high school preparation through AP/IB. Given these findings, it would be tremendously beneficial to explore the differences in student experiences and specifically

Black male student experiences at the college level, based on their enrollment in AP/IB courses.

Another finding of this study that has room for exploration was the involvement of undergraduate Black males in civic engagement, social justice, and advocacy. A future study might focus completely on the relationship between Black males and social justice, civic engagement, and advocacy as a method of navigating structural inequalities in the community and country. This being said, it is not enough for research to idly sit on shelves, this research must be integrated into teacher education and training.

Standards and Support

The education system uses a variety of standards to gauge academic ability and potential. Students are judged based on performance on the SATs and ACTs and on their performance in AP courses. I would argue that standards don't need to decrease or change, they need to not be exclusionary. If advanced placement courses are necessary for success in college, and Black students are underrepresented, the key is not to eradicate AP or to remove AP from admissions standards. The key is to have high expectations for Black male students and to ensure that Black male students have access to and support in Advanced Placement courses. It is unjust that because of funding, some schools do not have advanced placement courses, and thereby the students in those schools have less opportunity to attend competitive colleges and to succeed in college. The students in this study demonstrate the immense benefits that access to AP courses can have on students and their transition into and through college.

Creating a Positive Campus Climate

Creating a positive campus climate for all students is complicated but is a necessity. All students should feel a sense of belonging at their institution. While the idea of campus climate is broad, I am impassioned to hone in on reforms that need to happen to diversity education, under the premise that if students, and faculty and staff were better able to talk across differences and to find commonalities, campus climate would improve. I would argue that institutions need to spend more time educating all students, faculty and staff about how to interact across differences. Attendance at events that promote multiculturalism, internationalism, and diversity should be required of all students and should seek to help all students grow.

Increased Representation in Faculty/Staff and Coursework

One of the top recommendations the participants in this study had was to increase representation in faculty and coursework. I would argue that high-achieving Black undergraduate males are the precise population that has the potential to one day become faculty at institutions of higher education. Two of the participants in this study mentioned an interest in working in higher education at some point in their futures and five of the participants are planning on pursuing advanced degrees. The students in this study noted that they had faculty and staff who have encouraged them to pursue higher levels of education, and the two participants potentially interested in higher education have a variety of mentors who are providing them with the resources necessary to pursue that career one day if they choose to. To that end, hiring Black males as faculty members is

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not as simple as just deciding to increase representation; it starts at the very beginning of the education system and requires support of students every step of the way.

Conclusion

The six participants in this study each have impressive and well thought out post-college plans. Five of the participants are likely to go on to gain advanced degrees and all six of these students clearly expressed and demonstrated their plans to make significant impacts on the world after college. These students are examples of what can happen when we invest in students. Although it is not possible to attribute student success to a single factor for these participants, it is striking that their access to quality education, as well as the support and dedication of family members who privileged education, appears to have impacted their successful transition into the college setting.

This thesis aimed to share the stories of six high-achieving Black undergraduate male students in an honors college setting. My hope is that through these stories, readers are able to see the internal and external factors that led to the participant's success. Finally, through highlighting the positive stories of success, my goal is to move away from a deficit perspective and to provide examples of Black male high-achievement. I believe these success stories reveal an opportunity and responsibility as a society to promote access to high quality educational opportunities that will help students achieve their goals.

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APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The questions below aim to answer the following three research questions:

1) What are the common experiences of Black males in honors colleges?

2) What factors have led to the success of these students and how do these students perceive their success?

3) What challenges do these students face and how do they overcome/handle/deal with them?

Transition from High School to College

- Think back, what were your expectations of the Honors College?
  - Were they met?
- What factors led to your decision to attend the SCHC?
- How do you feel about your preparation up to college both academically and socially?

Beyond the Classroom Involvement

- What organizations are you involved in and why?
- What have you gained through your involvement in those organizations?
- What beyond the classroom experiences have most enhanced your college experience?
- What is the topic of your senior thesis?
  - Why did you pick that topic?

Race

- How important is your racial identity to you?
  - How frequently do you think about your race?
- How has your racial identity changed while in the Honors College?
- Do you feel that race has impacted your experience in the Honors College?
- How would you describe the racial climate in the Honors College? USC? Columbia?
- What does it mean to you to be a Black man?
- How does race intersect with your other identities?

Relationships

- Tell me about your relationships with faculty and staff.

   o How did those relationships form and how have they developed?
- Tell me about your relationships with your peers.
- In what ways has race affected your interactions/relationships with faculty? With peers?

Success

- What does success mean to you?
- Think back, what factors have contributed most to your success?
- What motivates you?
- What accomplishments are you most proud of?
- What personal characteristics have contributed to your success?
- What aspects of the honors college have contributed to your success?
- What would your friends say about you? Faculty/staff? Family?

Challenges

- What challenges have you faced while in the college?
- Think back, have you ever faced stereotypes, microaggressions, or racism while in college?
   o How did you respond?

Wrap Up

- What questions do you think that I should have asked?

APPENDIX B – INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN RESEARCH
APPROVAL LETTER for EXEMPT REVIEW**

This is to certify that the research proposal: **Pro00044865**

Entitled: *An Exploration of the Experiences of Black Males in Honors Colleges*

Submitted by:
    Principal Investigator: Sandra Greene
    College/Department: Education
                             Education Leadership & Policies
                             1728 College Street
                             Columbia, SC 29208

was reviewed in accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(**2**), the referenced study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on **7/16/2015.** No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. However, the Principal Investigator must inform the Office of Research Compliance of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research protocol could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this project was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three (3) years after termination of the study.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB). If you have questions, contact Arlene McWhorter at arlenem@sc.edu or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Johnson
IRB Manager

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