

NO PRESSURE, NO DIAMOND: A PORTRAIT OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE IN  
THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE

HONORS THESIS

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by

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to examine the Texas State University Honors College from the perspective of black students and faculty therein through the qualitative, ethnographic methodology of portraiture. Data were collected through interviews with six black students and four black professors who have participated in the Honors College at Texas State University, and a review of pertinent literature in the field of Honors and higher education was conducted. Emergent themes in this essay highlight the strengths of the Honors Program, analyze key differences between Honors and non-Honors students, identify the pressures faced by black Honors students and faculty, and propose potential strategies to increase the recruitment of black students into the Honors College. The findings of this research may have implications for prospective black Honors students, as well as Honors College faculty and administrators who are interested in black students' perceptions of Honors programs and their recruitment and retention therein.

keywords: higher education, black students, honors, college, African American studies

## **Introduction**

I was accepted into the Texas State University Honors College in March 2014. Dr. Heather Galloway, the Dean of the Honors College, personally signed my acceptance letter, with a friendly message about our upcoming study abroad trip to Phnom Penh, Cambodia. My journey in the Honors College began at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, in a course called Teaching Physical Science to Children. Along with five Cambodian physics students, and our instructor Dr. Galloway, a physics Ph.D., I learned how to demonstrate physics principles with common objects, in a hands-on way. Nita, Huot, Virak, Sak, and Chetra were all much shorter than I am, but their thin arms still hung long at their sides like mine, and their copper skin shone brightly even through the haze of clouds overhead. Those Cambodian students were the last people in my Honors classes who actually looked like me. My senior year at Texas State, I was the only black woman in the Honors Thesis preparation course, as well as a class called “Portraiture: Writing Yourself into Academia.” As my final research project for Portraiture class, I decided to investigate the experiences of black students and faculty in the Honors College, where we are a distinct minority. This essay explores the experiences of black students, myself included, and faculty who have, or are currently participating in the Honors College at Texas State University.

The methodology for this research is portraiture, which entails collecting qualitative data through observations, interviews, and a review of relevant literature. Observational data were collected during my interviews with research participants. Six of my peers in the Honors College, three black women and three black men, and four black

male professors consented to be interviewed about their experiences learning and teaching-both in the Honors College, and in non-honors classes. In addition, I reviewed literature that consists mostly of articles from peer-reviewed journals within the fields of higher education and college student development. I chose the portraiture methodology for this research because this topic resonates with me personally and portraiture prioritizes the researcher's perspective. Through portraiture, I hope to establish a greater understanding of the personal perceptions and concerns of black students and professors in the Texas State Honors College.

### **Context and Background**

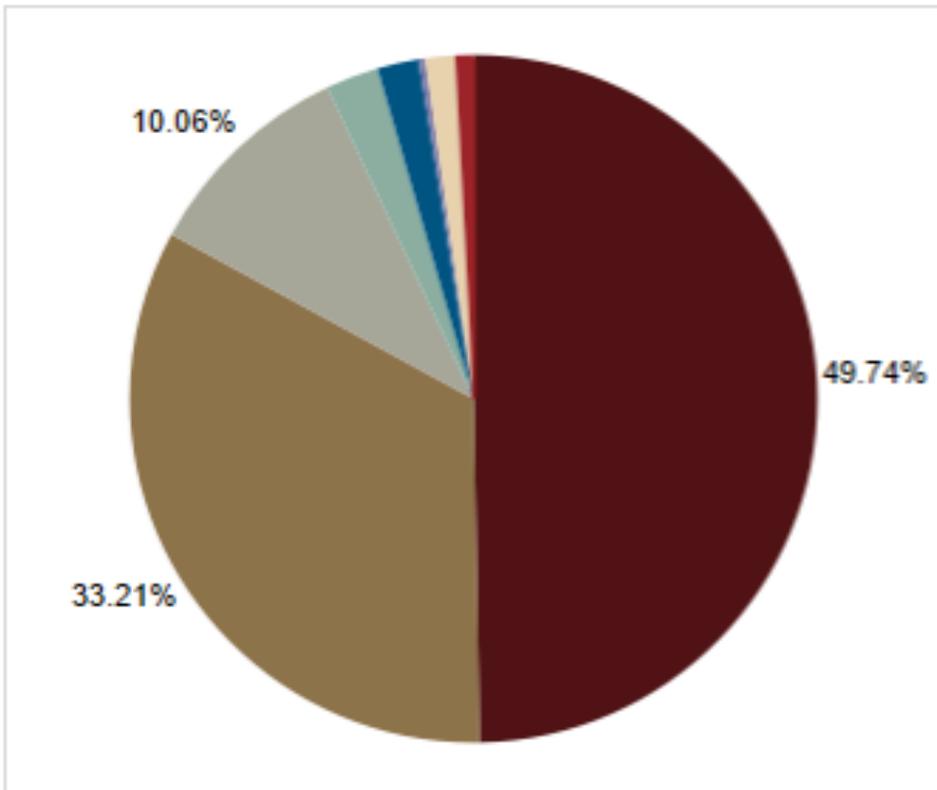
Texas State University is a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) that is rapidly diversifying with every new freshman class. Texas State officially desegregated in 1963 with the enrollment of Dana Jean Smith, the university's first black student (Common Experience). As of Fall 2014, forty-nine percent of undergraduate students were white, eight percent were black, and a whopping thirty-three percent were Hispanic. The university does a good job of providing academic, cultural and personal support for these and other minority students through clubs and organizations.

While the number of black students enrolled in Texas state is steadily increasing, the same cannot be said for faculty and staff. In my interview with Dr. Dwight Watson, history professor, he stated, "In 1999 when I came in there were only nine tenure rack black faculty at Texas State." Now, over fifteen years later, that number has only increased to thirty-one. The demographics of students and faculty enrolled and employed at Texas State are shown in charts one and two below. This information was last updated on March 9, 2016 (TXST Enrollment Explorer). In the Honors College Annual report,

student's field of study and classification are listed, but student demographics are not.

*Chart 1. Student Demographics*

### **Ethnicity**



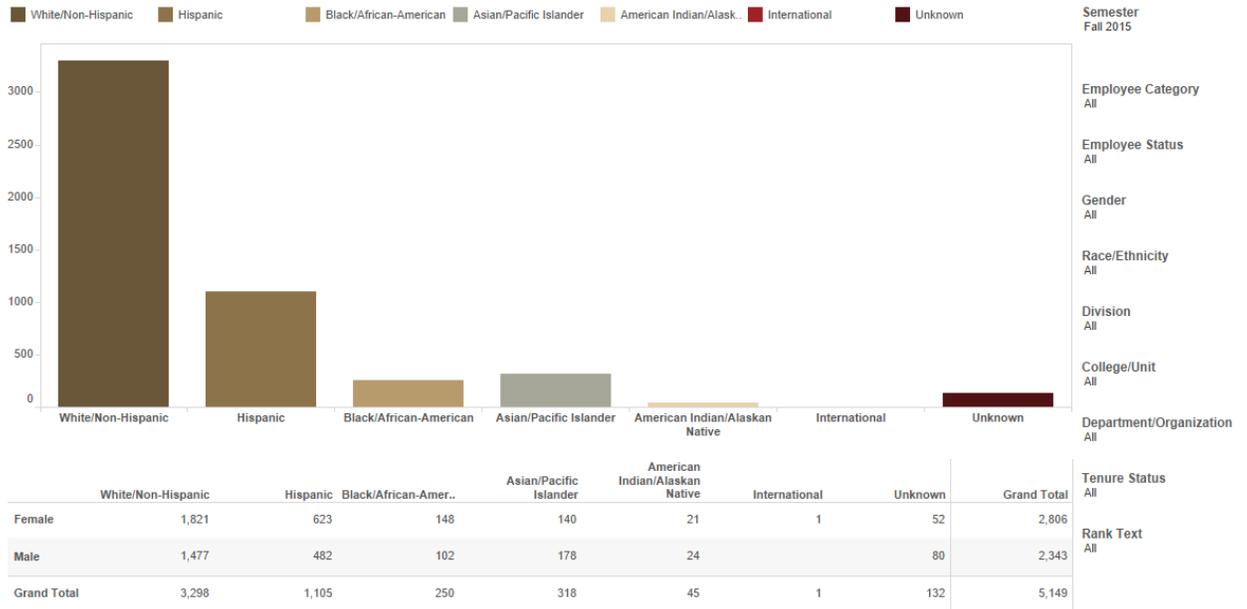
- |                        |                          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| White, non-Hispanic    | Multi-race, non-Hisp, n. |
| Hispanic               | Am Indian/Alaskan Nat.   |
| Black, non-Hispanic    | Non-Resident Internati.  |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | Unknown                  |

*Compiled by the Office of Institutional Research. Last*

## Chart 2. Faculty Demographics

### General Employee Information Employee Demographics by Year

Texas State University strives to maintain diversity among its employees. You may alter the selection by using the filters on the right.



Compiled by the Office of Institutional Research on 10/16/2015

Originally, I only wanted to investigate what motivates black students' participation in the Honors College. I have since expanded my investigation to include the overall experience of black students and faculty in the Honors College. Other studies regarding black students in higher education focus on their academic motivation through the use of behavior scales, surveys, and social cognition theories. In contrast, the findings of this research are presented in a more direct and organic way: through word-of-mouth from black students and professors themselves. Qualitative studies of this type tend to be interpretive of black students' experiences, rather than analytical or descriptive (Griffin 388). My research is unique in that its purpose is to create a holistic image of what it is like to be a black student or professor involved in the Texas State University Honors College. The purpose of this essay is also to examine the impact of the Honors learning

environment on black students' success. Consequently, implications of the data I have collected may enable Honors faculty and staff to gain a better understanding of black students' experience in their programs, and may ultimately improve their recruitment and retention.

## **Methodology**

Portraiture is a qualitative, ethnographic research method, created by Dr. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot at Harvard University. Portraiture is a method of inquiry and documentation for research in the social sciences. It systematically combines empirical descriptions of spaces, subjects, and emotions. Portraits are carefully designed to capture the dimensionality of human experience in a social and cultural context (Origins & Purpose). Unlike other methods of qualitative research, portraiture is reliant on personal narrative and the researcher's perspective or perch. Recognizing and incorporating my own past experiences into the research is crucial to the construction of the conclusions and theories I draw from my data.

Each of the students and professors I interviewed consented to be identified by name in this research. Student interview participants include six of my peers in the Honors College: Tyler Smith, Joseph Sikazwe, Brittani Young, Travis Green, Storm Tyler, and Adam Odomore. They are high-achieving black students whom I met and befriended during my undergraduate study. Interviews with Tyler, Joseph, Brittani, and Travis took place in various rooms in the Honors building, Lampasas Hall. I interviewed Adam at Stellar Cafe, a local coffee shop, and Storm in my studio apartment. Faculty participants include Dr. Raphael Travis from the School of Social Work, Dr. Dwight Watson in the History Department, Dr. Christopher Busey in the College of Education,

and Dr. Elvin Holt in the Department of English. Dr. Travis has taught an Honors course in the past, Dr. Busey and Dr. Watson have supervised Honors undergraduate theses, and Dr. Holt has taught three Honors courses, as well as supervised two theses. Each of the professors interviews took place in his office on campus. Interview participants' responses to questions, as well as my notes on our surroundings and their behaviors during the interviews will inform the data for this research portrait.

### **Literature Review**

I reviewed scholarly articles from the *Journal of College Student Development*, the *Journal of Negro Education*, and the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*. When I began reviewing literature, I was still primarily focused on investigating black students' motivation to participate in the Honors College. Since expanding my research to encompass black students' experience in Honors as a whole, much of the literature I reviewed became less useful. Sources most frequently referenced in the findings of this study are described below. The most pertinent articles were from the *Journal of College Student Development*.

Sharon Fries-Britt at the University of Maryland conducted a study in the late 1990s, which examined the challenges faced by 12 high-achieving black students who were enrolled in a merit-based scholarship program. Her research method was qualitative and conclusions were generalized based on participant responses during interviews. Categories of evidence she found included the students' challenges with blending racial and academic identity and challenges of identifying with peers. The study also outlined the significant role that faculty play in the development of black students' academic identity. Although this source is somewhat outdated, the conclusions drawn are still

relevant and consistent with more recent research, and were therefore useful for this study.

Kevin Cokley of the University of Texas at Austin conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of the Academic Motivation Scale with black college students. While the results of this study were inconclusive, it was valuable in providing a few key bibliographic references for me to investigate. A study by Matthew Reeder and Neal Schmitt analyzed the differences between the academic achievement of black students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). This source is an excellent qualitative study that exemplifies the nature of the challenges that black students at PWIs face and must overcome to succeed in their academic endeavors. It asserts that black students at PWIs must be exceptionally self-reliant and motivated to succeed as a minority in their college environment.

One of the most valuable sources I found for this research was published by Dr. Kimberly Griffin. Her study entitled “Striving for Success: A Qualitative Exploration of Competing Theories of High-Achieving Black College Students’ Academic Motivation” assessed the academic motivation of nine black collegians attending a large, public university (Griffin 385). Her findings were categorized using the self-determination theory, socio-cognitive theory, and attribution theory to describe the source of the students’ motivation. The findings did not conclude that any one of these theories was more important than the others in describing the students’ motivation, but that a combination of factors motivates the students.

## **Findings**

Based on my interviews with students and professors, review of literature, and personal experience, I have synthesized the findings of this study into four distinct themes: withstanding the pressure, staying motivated, creating an intimate environment, and developing diversity. Each of these themes represents the major components of black students' experience in the Texas State Honors College. My findings indicate that black students and professors in the Texas State Honors College are under significant external and internal pressure to succeed in the classroom. However, both benefit greatly from the positive pressure or influence of the Honors College's intimate learning environment, and the personal relationships developed there. Finally, the emphasis on diversity in the Honors College makes it a welcoming environment for black students to share their perspectives.

### *Withstanding the Pressure*

Black professors in the Honors College are under pressure to ensure that their classes are successful and Honors students' advanced academic needs are met. In our interview Dr. Watson expressed the nature of this challenge saying, "Here at Texas State, I had to change how I taught in order to adapt to the changing intellectual student." Dr. Holt mentioned the challenge of balancing the rigor of Honors and non-honors coursework and the task of "teaching to the middle" by making sure that his classes are challenging enough for gifted students, while not over the heads of the rest. This pressure on black Honors professors culminates in the course evaluations that students fill out to critique their professors and their overall class experience. The students' course reviews carry a lot of weight in determining whether a professor will be considered for a tenure track position. As shown in Chart 2, there are very few tenured or tenure-track black

professors at Texas State. The stakes are very high for them to succeed and stand-out, just as they are for black Honors students.

Black students begin shouldering external pressure to succeed academically, even before they decide to apply to the Honors College. I learned this from my first interviewee, Tyler Smith, whom I met on the first day of class in Fall 2015. She sat, regally, at one of the round tables in the Honors Coffee Forum, listening to music. Her Marley Twists fell in long ringlets from a high bun crowning the top of her head. Even while looking down with headphones in her ears, her aura was energetic and inviting, and I just had to say hello. About one month later, we sat together in a study room in Lampasas to talk about her experience in the Honors College.

My first question for her was simply “What motivates you to be involved in the Honors College?” Tyler answered, “I guess I would have to start with the fact that my mom is a teacher, and she always had a sense of wanting us to be overachievers” (Smith). I thought briefly about my own mother, who teaches seventh grade English, but couldn’t remember ever feeling any distinct pressure from her to succeed academically. I had heard different stories from my classmates growing up about parents who would “ground” their children for bringing home a shabby report card, but all of my discipline had been for bad behavior at home, not my performance in school. Tyler continued, “Since a young age, she has always told me, ‘Oh don’t think you’re just gonna go through and do things as easily as other kids’” (Smith). Seeing Tyler smile as she imitated her mother, I could tell that she did not resent her for instilling in her what I viewed as an inferiority complex. Our interview had only just begun, the first of ten that I

would conduct during this research, and it seemed I was already off to a not-so-simple start.

Scholarly literature also attests to the role parents play in shaping high-achieving black students' academic motivation. Dr. Kimberly Griffin's study *Striving for Success: A Qualitative Exploration of Competing Theories of High-Achieving Black College Students' Academic Motivation* outlines the effect of family influence on black student's academic motivation. Her findings concluded that "one external source of motivation reported by almost all participants was their parents" (Griffin 392). While this is consistent with what I learned in my interview with Tyler, it only reflects parents' influence in shaping black student's overall academic direction. Tyler's account of her mother's influence is also exemplary of the pressure Tyler felt to succeed as a minority student.

Dr. Griffin's study also describes attempts to disprove negative stereotypes about the academic abilities of Blacks as another externally inspired source of their academic motivation (Griffin 393). According to Reeder and Schmitt, African American students at PWIs must exert a greater degree of perseverance and drive in order to achieve at the same level of performance as their counterparts at HBCUs (Reeder and Schmitt 32). This implies that as black students attending a PWI, my participants and I naturally have to work harder than our peers to achieve academically. Perseverance in academics means committing oneself to the attainment of goals and priorities in academic pursuits, "regardless of the potential difficulties and impediments that might prevent potential goal attainment" (Reeder and Schmitt 32). These findings exemplify the racial aspect of the external pressure affecting black Honors students, before they even step into their first

Honors class. During my interview with Storm Tyler, she mentioned that she applied to the Honors College, specifically to set herself apart from the predominantly white crowd. “As a minority and as a woman,” she said with certainty, “I knew that every extra thing I did would help me to stand out” (Tyler).

Dr. Raphael Travis spoke very candidly about race in academia as we sat across from each other in his office, surrounded by books about positive youth development and photos of his smiling children. “I identify as black,” he stated. “I wear it on my sleeve, it’s a big part of who I am. And I try to show my students that in a bridge-building way, not in a divisive way” (Travis). In his Honors class “Hip Hop Culture and Positive Youth Development,” Dr. Travis’ goal was to create a dialogue about social justice and race without perpetuating negative stereotypes in his students. On the contrary, he challenged them to “take the risk” of developing a new understanding of themselves. For this purpose he developed “you” assignments, which are student-centered and have “no wrong answers” (Travis). For their final project, his students’ “you” assignment was to develop a mixtape of hip hop songs regarding positive youth development and then write a reflection on the process. This assignment was Dr. Travis’ “attempt to bring some kind of creativity to it, or kind of a different approach” (Travis). Introspective assignments such as these give Honors students a platform to voice their opinions. When given the freedom to express ideas without fear of a negative impact on their grade, the pressure on students to perform academically in order to overturn stereotypes is lessened.

### *Staying Motivated*

Black Honors students and professors not only strive to stand out from the crowd, but we are also driven by a personal need to succeed. “Intrinsic motivation is the inherent

tendency or desire of the individual to learn, explore, and seek challenges because of the inherent interest and enjoyment experienced by an individual” (Cokley 126). The meaning of intrinsic motivation is exemplified by Dr. Travis’ mantra: “grow as a person, grow as a professional” (Travis). These aims drive black Honors students' desire for academic success, as well motivate black professors to complete the rigorous process of proposing and teaching an Honors class.

Adam Odomore, my friend and interviewee, cited his own determination to succeed, graduate with Honors, and set himself apart from the crowd as the reasons for his persistence in the Honors College. Adam graduated in December 2015, and is “very excited” about what lies ahead for him. However, Adam’s journey in the Texas State Honors College actually began with a setback. At the time he applied, Adam’s GPA did not meet the 3.25 requirement for admission into the Honors College. He recalled the trying time saying that after he applied, “Dean Galloway emailed me back saying that the essay I wrote was very, very good but to work on my GPA and then I could get in. So I wrote her back saying, you know, ‘I’m going to be applying again, so please don’t read my essay from last time,’” he chuckled with a bright smile. He exuded confidence as he sat across from me in Stellar Cafe, stylishly reclining in his tweed jacket and brown beret. I could hear the passion in his voice rising over the clacking of the espresso machine behind us. His pride in his accomplishment was as infectious as the chill of the autumn wind outside.

While Adam’s determination to participate in the Honors College was born of his own intrinsic motivation, another interviewee, Travis Green, revealed the extent to which an academic superiority complex also motivated black honors students to succeed.

Travis' active participation in the Honors College is as much a testament to his own interest in advancing his scholarship, as it is to how greatly he was influenced by his experience competing among other high-achieving students in high school. Before coming to Texas State, he recalls learning in a cut-throat environment where Advanced Placement (AP) students "had our own hallway and took all of our classes together, completely separate from other students, who were addressed as the regular students or the riff-raff. I was shocked at the harsh terminology, and wondered whether it was the students or faculty at his high school who perpetuated its use. He went on to say that it was in fact, his teachers and principals who implied that non-AP students were to be looked upon as "lesser." Travis carried a superior mindset with him as he transitioned into college, but he soon discovered that "nothing he did in high school really mattered anymore." The playing field was leveled, and he was forced to figure out what he was going to do to keep himself from falling in among the crowd of average students. Although his ultra-competitive view towards school "put him in a really bad place," it was a key factor in what led him to participate in the Honors College.

### *Creating an Intimate Environment*

Unlike Travis, for Dr. Busey the ultra-competitive atmosphere of the Honors College at his alma mater was very off-putting. "Actually, I didn't care to be in the Honors College at all," he dryly stated. Dr. Busey's view of the Honors students at his school reflects a common stigma about the exclusivity of Honors programs. He especially didn't identify with the Honors students on a social level and didn't see the Honors college at his university as "a place where he could grow in his identity" (Busey). However, the intimate environment of the Texas State Honors College, and the

relationships we developed between students and faculty therein give black Honors students the greatest opportunity to withstand the pressure we must bear to succeed.

The atmosphere in Lampasas Hall promotes a comradery uncommon in a non-Honors setting. The lights downstairs are comfortably dim in an entrance area and the coffee forum. Several small circular tables fill the room; their darkly colored wood evokes memories of gathering around a campfire. The Honors coffee forum is also home to the Gallery of the Common Experience. Curated art which evokes the Common Experience theme is showcased on the walls of the Coffee Forum in semesterly exhibitions. Two steep staircases decorated with beautiful Southwestern mosaic tile, connect the stone foyer downstairs with the creaky wooden floor upstairs. There are only two classrooms in Lampasas Hall. Instead of desks, students sit facing each other at long conference tables arranged in a rectangle. The entire layout of the Honors College is centered on creating conversation and stimulating thought.

While Lampasas Hall is a physically welcoming and relaxing environment, the Honors College itself is an advanced academic community where serious scholars come together and challenge each other's thoughts and perceptions. "You get this kind of dichotomy in the building," as Storm pointed out in our interview. The dual nature of the Honors College's atmosphere, and the challenging academic work that goes on inside creates an environment that is particularly predisposed to community-building, which is critical to black students' success. In a study completed by Dr. Sharon Fries-Britt at the University of Maryland, interviews with twelve black merit scholars enrolled in the Meyerhoff Program for STEM students revealed the need of high-achieving black students to "connect with a community of peers" (Fries-Britt 59). For the students in her

study, as well the students I interviewed, participating in an Honors Program “was a welcome opportunity to express their interests in their academics and still be embraced as authentically black in a community of peers who shared similar interests” (Fries-Britt 61). Black students benefit from their friendships in the Honors College community but even more so from the intimate learning environment within individual Honors classes.

As mentioned before, classes in the Honors College are usually limited to twenty students to facilitate an intimate learning environment and encourage connections between students and faculty (Honors Courses). The personal relationships that honors students develop with their professors are what really advances their academic experience. When faculty members assume that minority students are capable and have something to contribute, they help eliminate some of the barriers the students encounter in the academics (Fries-Britt 63). Storm told me about one such professor, in her Honors Graph Theory class. “I had always struggled with math you know. But she really helped me out. She encouraged me and broke things down so that I could really understand. I ended up making an A in the class.” Storm’s success in an advanced Honors math class perfectly illustrates the positive effect intimate interaction with faculty has on black Honors students’ academic success.

Out of all of my faculty interview participants, Dr. Elvin Holt has taught the most Honors classes. In 2000, he taught “The African Novel,” in 2003 he co-taught a course on black theatre with Dr. Sandra Mayo, and in 2006 he taught *Disturbing the Peace: Politics of Language and Power in Hip Hop Culture*. We sat across from each other in his small office turned black literature library, as we have so many times before, to chat about his experiences teaching in the Honors College. “The thing I remember most was that the

students were very much interested in interacting with each other,” he mentioned (Holt). “I used to have to bang my gavel to bring them to order before class began” (Holt). Dr. Holt enjoyed his experience with the first group of Honors students he taught very much, and found their enthusiasm “very encouraging.” The students’ “flurries of discussion” regarding course material exemplifies the friendly atmosphere and discursive learning prevalent in the Honors College.

Although academic ability is a major factor in the identity development of high-achieving black collegians, connections with other like-minded students are also very important (Fries-Britt 59). Several of my interview participants, including Joseph, Storm, Adam, and Tyler were actually brought into the Honors College community because of the guidance or mentorship of a friend who was already a member. Tyler recalled a black woman named Alex, who has since graduated from Texas State, but she went out of her way to encourage Tyler to get involved with the Honors College. “She took me on a tour around the whole place, and talked to me about the Honors College. Seeing her as a black female working here, being an Honors College student, and doing her thesis, I was just like ‘wow like that's what I wanna do.’ That’s really what started it all off”. Tyler also worked as a receptionist for the Honors College, just as Alex had. I listened to her eloquently present her Honors thesis about Haitian Vodou last November. She graduated with Honors along with Adam and Brittini in December 2015. Tyler’s involvement in the Honors College perfectly represents the overarching theme of this research. She was under enormous pressure to succeed academically, but within the positive, intimate environment of the Honors College, she became part of a supportive community and developed relationships that aided her overall success in reaching her goals.

### *Developing Diversity*

Since 2004, Texas State University and the surrounding San Marcos community have participated in the Common Experience, a yearlong intellectual awareness and conversation initiative that focuses on a different theme each year (Common Experience). Faculty and staff in the Honors College, particularly Diann McCabe, are important members of the committee who select a theme and organize events for the Common Experience each year. Dr. Dwight Watson, another of my interviewees, was a pivotal member on the committee of the 2015-2016 Common Experience, which was themed “Exploring Democracy's Promise: From Segregation to Integration” (Common Experience). Together with Diann McCabe, he selected the common experience theme, organized research events, and hosted a panel with the first five black women to enroll at Texas State. The Honors College also hosted a public reception for the “Black, White, and Grey: A Spectrum of Views on Integration” art gallery. In addition to coordinating the Common Experience, the extent to which the Honors College values diversity is also reflected in the variety of courses offered every semester.

From his experience while teaching his Honors class, Dr. Travis stated that he could tell “Honors’ leadership was incredibly invested in offering students unique learning opportunities that meant something, not just classes that were fun and unique for the sake of being fun and unique.” From “Integral Ecology” to “Women in Texas Music,” Honors classes give students have the opportunity to learn with a small group of peers who share their interests, or learn about something altogether new to them. For Joseph Sikazwe, who is a Pre-Medical student, “being in the Honors College broadens [his]

interactions with other students from different majors instead of just staying in the Supply [Science] and Chemistry buildings all of the time.” Honors courses prioritize student-professor discussion, writing, and projects rather than lectures and multiple-choice tests, which create a challenging and rewarding learning environment that suits the learning styles of numerous students (Honors Courses).

My interviewees and I only represent a fraction of the diverse students and faculty who are a part of the Honors College. We are a varied group within the black community, as well. I asked each of my participants which minority groups they identify with and received a wide array of responses. In addition to being black, Storm, Tyler, and Brittni identify as women. Storm is also of Cape Verdean descent, in particular. Adam, Joseph, and Travis all consider themselves black men, and Adam and Joseph originally hail from Nigeria and Zambia, respectively. Travis also identifies as an openly gay man. Acknowledging diverse backgrounds not only plays a role in the success of black students in the Honors program, but also ensures the growth of shared perspectives and fruitful discussion within the Honors College as a whole. When describing the importance of diversity to the success of the Honors College, Britanni stated beautifully:

I think it’s really important to show diversity. It’s not even, you know, just ethnic-wise but in diversity of thought because if you have kind of like the same person, not personalities but kind of like the same views or perspectives, it’s kind of hard to see where growth can occur in the Honors College. I think bringing in different ideas and perspectives, adding into that diversity of thought would help the Honors College to progress. (Young)

The value of diversity is only as evident as its representation in any community. In the context of diversity in higher education, representation means a noticeable presence of other people within a shared minority group. Students and professors alike share concerns about black students' under representation in the honors college. Dr. Holt once wrote to Diann McCabe after attending an event for student's academic achievement asking "where are all of the black men?" He has also suggested to Honors administration that "there needs to be some way to aggressively seek out students who are interested in Honors" and that black students "need to shine in academics," as well (Holt).

When asked about the benefits of an Honors educational experience for black students, every professor I interviewed was adamant about its value. Dr. Holt stated "it would be good for black students' self esteem" to be represented in Honors. Dr. Watson and Dr. Busey agreed that a black student who joins Honors would "graduate with a more rigorous curriculum background" and thereby have "more opportunities after graduation" in the workforce, or to further their education. Dr. Travis said that through his study of positive youth development, he concluded that "spaces kuje those in the Honors College are gold" for black students who may feel isolated or like they don't belong as the university gets bigger and bigger.

At the end of every peer interview, I asked my participants, "What do you think your presence adds to the Honors College?" Consistently, this was the most difficult question for them to answer, and the question that brought out the greatest variety of responses. Storm said she brought diversity of thought, and valuable new ideas to the Honors College. Brittni stated that she brings a new perspective to Honors as a non-

traditional undergraduate since she is an older student among younger ones. Tyler said with a giggle, “I just think I’m goofy.” For Joseph, sharing stories about his upbringing in Zambia and Great Britain is his greatest contribution to the diversity of Honors. Travis, who struggled with this question during an otherwise robust interview, said that he brought to Honors “a certain vitality.” Adam shared a sentiment that was common among all of my interview participants. “There’s not very many African Americans in the Honors college, so for me I stand out. Very much so” (Odomore). Black students’ acknowledgement of their contributions to the Honors College is critical to their transformation. Through their success, and even simply their presence in Honors, they aid in the formation of invaluable diversity.

Based on my interviews with students and professors, review of literature, and personal experience, I have synthesized the findings of this study into four distinct themes: withstanding the pressure, staying motivated, environment and intimacy, and developing diversity. Each of these themes represents the major components of black students’ experience in the Texas State Honors College. My findings indicate that black students and professors in the Texas State Honors College are under significant external and internal pressure to succeed in the classroom. However, both benefit greatly from the positive pressure or influence of the Honors College’s intimate learning environment, and the personal relationships developed there. Finally, the emphasis on diversity in the Honors College makes it a welcoming environment for black students to share their perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

This research portrait sought to create a holistic image of black students' experience as participants in the Texas State University Honors College. Interviews with six black Honors students and ten black Honors professors, information from scholarly articles, and personal narrative descriptions were woven together to exemplify four key themes. The first theme outlined the sources of internal and external academic pressure that black students and professors endure. The second discussed black students' and professors' self-motivation, and the third described how the intimate nature of the Honors classes and environment enables black students' success. Finally, the fourth theme outlined the overall value that the Honors College places on diversity, and the particular ways in which black Honors students add to it and benefit from it.

Limitations of this study mostly stem from the nature of my relationships with my interview participants and the Honors College itself. Subsequent studies about black students' experience in the Honors College could be conducted by a third-party researcher to vary the results. In addition, four out of six students I interviewed are International Studies or International Relations majors. Future studies could include a larger cross-section of participants from many different fields of study. The findings of this research may have implications for prospective black Honors students, as well as Honors College faculty and administrators who are interested in the recruitment and retention of black students in their programs. Institutions that are looking to increase the enrollment of black students in their Honors programs can apply the results of this research by surveying black students who are already participants regarding their concerns about diversity and representation in Honors. At my own institution, this research will help to confirm the positive impact Texas State Honors faculty and staff

exert on black students, which will hopefully encourage the deliberate continuation of this behavior.

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