SENSE OF BELONGING AND THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR IN A RACIALLY DIVERSE HONORS PROGRAM

by

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Abstract

SENSE OF BELONGING AND THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR IN A RACIALLY DIVERSE HONORS PROGRAM

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This qualitative study fills a gap in the research the lived experiences of Students of Color in racially diverse honors programs by illuminating the experiences of 12 Students of Color enrolled in a racially diverse honors program. Enrollment in an honors program has been demonstrated to be beneficial to promoting a sense of belonging for college students. However, prior to this study, little research has been done on the experiences of Students of Color in an honors program that is racially diverse. Using sense of belonging for college students (Strayhorn, 2019) as a theoretical framework allowed for several themes to emerge organically after coding and analyzing participant responses, including academic challenge and prestige, community and friendship, suggestions for improvement, and influence of race on the experience.

While most of the responses were similar for three of the themes, the theme of influence of race on the experience had a clear division between the responses of the male participants and the female participants. The female participants expressed concerns about additional pressures that they faced due to the intersectionality of their identities as females and Students of Color.
The male participants, however, did not share many of these concerns. This was the most important finding for the study.

Implications for research include further research on the intersectionality of racial identity and gender identity and how it influences the lived experiences for students in honors programs. Implications for policy include continued funding for honors programs at the post-secondary level, and increased options for gifted and talented education options for Students of Color in the K-12 sector. Implications for practice include intentionally recruiting Students of Color to honors programs, as well as providing programming and support for Students of Color enrolled in honors programs.

This study affirmed the use of the sense of belonging for college students theoretical framework for studying students in honors program. The findings of this study in particular connected with four of the seven components of the theoretical framework, illustrating the usefulness of the theory in studying the lived experiences of Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Honors programs give high-achieving undergraduate students a richer and more in-depth educational experience than what is offered in standard undergraduate degree programs (Johnson M. A., 2015). Joining an honors program allows students to tailor their collegiate experiences through individual study projects and honors-only course sections (Carnicom, 2011). Students in honors programs may also benefit from participation in a living-learning community, (LLC), which are residential communities where students are grouped together due to commonalities (such as similar majors or membership in an honors program), enrollment in classes together, or programming specifically for the group (Dunn & Dean, 2013).

Due to their close community, honors programs can also promote a strong sense of belonging (Wawrzynski, Madden, & Jensen, 2012). A sense of belonging and connectedness to a group is a way to build a network of support at their academic institution (O'Keefe, 2013). This is a bond that people have that allows them to feel like a member of a group or society, particularly for college students who may be away from family (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017). This sense of belonging is associated with long-term benefits for both students and their academic institutions, as persons who have built a sense of belonging with their institution are more likely to persist and graduate (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

A sense of belonging may be more difficult for students from underrepresented groups in higher education, as honors programs tend to have disproportionately large White populations (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.), with an underrepresentation of Students of Color (Scott, 2017). Students of Color are students from non-White, underrepresented backgrounds in higher education, with the intentional capitalization following other scholars who use the
capitalization of this term to push for social justice (Kholi, 2008). Most of the research that is available on honors Students of Color comes from administrative perspectives focused on the racial achievement gap, with students expressing concerns of tokenism (being selected only for diversification purposes), isolation (due to being an outsider), and imposter syndrome (doubt of personal ability) (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007), with a need for more research from the perspective of the lived experiences of students. Nevertheless, there are a few honors programs in the United States with sizable populations of Students of Color that have not been well-researched (Klos, 2018). Thus, there is a gap in the research literature concerning the lived experiences of Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program.

Background on Honors Programs

The experiences of honors students include both academic and social domains (Rinn, 2018). Students must often meet additional expectations, such as earning honors course credits (Harkins, 2015), conducting undergraduate research (Schuman, 2006), and completing a senior thesis or capstone requirement (Cognard-Black & Savage, 2016). Students may earn honors credits through either honors-only class sections (Dailey, 2016), through enrollment in hybrid class sections with additional requirements for honors students (Youmans, 2016), or through contracts with an instructor in a regular class (Stanford & Shattell, 2010). In an honors-only class section, class sizes are typically much smaller than average to allow for more in-depth discussion, and the chance for students to have a better connection with the faculty member (Dailey, 2016). Hybrid courses are class sections that have both honors and non-honors students enrolled, and in which honors students have additional assignments – these types of courses may be offered by administrators when there are not enough honors students to fill an entire class section, but there are several who are interested in earning honors credit on the same topic.
Students in some cases may be able to receive honors credit in a regular class by performing some independent work for the course individually with the professor, often called a contract, allowing a student to learn independence, as well as get to know a faculty mentor on a one-to-one basis (Stanford & Shattell, 2010).

Knowing and working with faculty members on smaller class projects is an excellent preparation for students to fulfill the standard requirements of undergraduate research for a thesis or capstone project (Cognard-Black & Savage, 2016). In addition to working more closely with faculty members, students also have specialized advising in an honors program, which allows them to have additional attention to help reach their goals (Johnson, Walther, & Medley, 2018). Honors students do not only have extra time in classrooms and laboratories; they often are involved in other high-impact practices at their university as well (Cognard-Black & Savage, 2016).

High-impact academic activities allow students to more actively engage in their education, may involve more learning outside of the classroom, and provide more of a challenge for students (McMahan, 2015). Beyond academics, honors students may be involved in experiential learning participation in their university years (Jacobs & Walsh-Dilley, 2018). This can be a subset of high-impact academic activities, as it allows students to have a more hands-on experience than in a traditional class, such as through internships and undergraduate research assistantships, and other activities outside the classroom (Gilbert, Banks, Houser, Rhodes, & Lees, 2014). An example of experiential learning is the Partners in the Parks program run by the National Collegiate Council (MacLean & White, 2013). The administrators for the Partners in the Park program give students the opportunity to engage in volunteering and educational
opportunities within the U.S. National Park system while engaging with other honors students from across the country (MacLean & White, 2013).

In a quantitative study using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), researchers wanted to explore the influence that being in an honors program can have on collegiate experiences (Miller & Dumford, 2018). Results from the study show that participation in an honors program is positively correlated with collegiate engagement, particularly at the first-year student level, with some continuing benefit even into students’ senior year (Miller & Dumford, 2018). Seniors in the study continued to have relatively higher levels of interactions with faculty members than non-honors students (Miller & Dumford, 2018), which can be advantageous for those wanting to further their studies in graduate school.

Many universities offer special benefits to students enrolled in an honors program, such as honors-only housing (Daffron & Holland, 2009). Researchers have studied the effects of living in an honors LLC and found statistically significant benefits regarding involvement and engagement, meaningful social interaction, and building a sense of belonging (Wawrzynski, Madden, & Jensen, 2012). Similar results were seen by researchers in a 2015 study of 105 honors students living in university housing concerning the same topic (Mead, Rieger, & Jones, 2015). Thus, for high-achieving students looking for a community in college, an honors program may be a good fit.

College Access for Students of Color

A sense of belonging and community may be more difficult for students to build if they feel different from their peers (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017). Creating a sense of belonging is particularly crucial for Students of Color because they are less likely to attend college than their White peers, and when they do, they are more likely to attend a lower-tier university or a
community college than their White peers (Baker, Klasik, & Reardon, 2018). There are a number of reasons for this disparity, such as the legacy of segregation, location, and socioeconomic class. The *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited racial segregation in education (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). However, by that point, Students of Color were lagging behind White students in acquiring the cultural as well as social capital concerning the college choice process that can be beneficial in navigating the college access pipeline (McCoy, 2014).

The social rules for navigating the entrance process for collegiate education can especially be difficult to learn for a student who is a first-generation college student in their family (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). Students of Color tend to be first-generation college students more than White students disproportionately; this creates ongoing obstacles for college access (McCoy, 2014). For instance, first-generation college Students of Color may make proximity of a campus a high priority in order to be able to either continue to live with family or be nearby, which is important in some cultures (Chen & Zerquera, 2018). These students may also choose to live near home as well as to save money due to first-generation college students being more likely to be poor; however, the colleges near Students of Color tend to be lower in quality (Hillman, 2016).

**Equity in Education for Students of Color**

Inequities in formal education along racial lines do not begin during the start of college but can start at the beginning of formal education (Ford & Whiting, 2016). Students of Color are less likely than White students to be identified for gifted and talented education programs as young children (Ford, Whiting, & Moore, 2009). However, researchers have found that when students are universally screened for giftedness as opposed to teacher nomination or self-
selection by parents, the percentage of Students of Color who are put into gifted education dramatically increases (Card & Giuliano, 2016). Students who are in gifted and talented education programs early on are more likely to become involved in college preparatory classes during their secondary education, making it all too easy for students to get overlooked for more rigorous courses if they have not been in the most advanced options from the start (Ford & Whiting, 2016).

High schools with populations with high percentages of Students of Color are less likely to offer college preparatory curriculum options, such as Advanced Placement (AP) classes, putting Students of Color at a disadvantage, as these types of courses can help students gain entrance into more competitive university options (Barnard-Brak, McGaha-Garnett, & Burley, 2011). Students of Color are less likely to pursue post-secondary education than White students, and those who do attend college enroll disproportionately in community colleges and lower-ranked universities (Horn & Flores, 2012).

**Statement of the Problem**

Students of Color are disproportionately represented in higher education (Welton & Martinez, 2014), and this disparity is even starker in honors programs where White students comprise 67% (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.), as opposed to 57% of all U.S. college students (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Students of Color may be discouraged when considering joining an honors program if they would be one of only a few Students of Color (Scott, 2017). Students of Color who are underrepresented at their college campus may feel out of place and lack a sense of belonging, making it more difficult for them to be successful (Griffin, Cunningham, & George Mwangi, 2016). Students who feel a sense of belonging on their college campus are more likely to persist and complete their degrees (Strayhorn, 2019). Due
to the disproportionate enrollment of Students of Color in honors programs (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.), there is a gap in the research literature on the experiences of Students of Color who are successfully enrolled in honors programs in general, and an even bigger gap concerning a success narrative for students enrolled in racially diverse honors programs (Reddick et al., 2017). Understanding how to help Students of Color feel a sense of belonging may then help these students to persist both in their honors program as well as at their university.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience (van Manen, 2016) of Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program at a large urban research university in the Southwestern area of the United States. This study was used to explore the experiences and perspectives of Students of Color who had enrolled and persisted in a racially diverse honors program at Southwestern University (SWU, a pseudonym) (van Manen, 2016).

**Research Goals**

There is a gap in the literature concerning success narratives for Students of Color in racially diverse honors programs. Understanding the lived experiences of Students of Color with successful stories can help pave the way for success for future students as well. The main goals that I had for my study were to investigate (a) the lived experiences of Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program, (b) to understand what fosters a sense of belonging for the perceptions of Students of Color in honors programs, (c) to understand what hinders a sense of belonging for Students of Color in honors programs.

**Research Questions**

To develop an understanding of this phenomenon, the following research questions guided this study:
1. How do Students of Color enrolled in honors programs describe their experiences?

2. What helps foster a sense of belonging among the Students of Color enrolled in honors programs?

3. What hinders a sense of belonging among Students of Color enrolled in honors programs?

The research questions were selected with the goal of understanding the lived experiences of honors Students of Color. The research questions were helpful in understanding how Students of Color described their lived experiences of being Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program. Finally, the research questions were selected to provide information to honors program administrators who want to build a culture of inclusion and diversity.

**Significance of the Study**

Students of Color are an increasing segment of college student populations as compared to previous decades, but they are still underrepresented in higher education (Naylor, Wyatt-Nichol, & Brown, 2015). Similarly, enrollment of Students of Color in collegiate honors programs is even more disproportionately small, with, for example, Latinx Students of Color comprising 18% of U.S. college students (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), but only 9 percent of honors students (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.). The significance of this study is to provide research concerning the Students of Color who are enrolled in honors programs and contribute to the knowledge of honors program administrators who are seeking to increase diversity and inclusion in their honors programs. Previous researchers (Reddick et al., 2017) have looked at the typical scenario, with Students of Color in a non-diverse honors setting, and explored the experiences of these students who discussed challenges related to being in the minority. However, no researchers have looked at this topic from the proposed perspective,
exploring the lived experience of Students of Color in a racially diverse honors setting. Thus, this study could prove useful to honors administrators seeking ways to incorporate more diversity and inclusivity in their programs.

**Personal Relevance**

As a White female graduate of a racially diverse honors program and current academic advisor for a racially diverse honors program, I have been curious about how Students of Color perceive their experiences. I found great value in honors education and promote the option for qualified students whenever possible. I believe in developing students to their own highest potential. As a White college administrative professional, however, I know that I come from a position of privilege, and that simply because I had a positive experience does not mean that other White students will, let alone Students of Color. After discussion with others in the honors field, I chose to focus this study on the lived experiences of Students of Color in a racially diverse honors setting because it is a relevant and under-researched topic in the field. As a White woman working at a racially diverse university, I am interested in the continual improvement of the collegiate experience for the students on my campus, as well as in conducting research that can contribute to information that can help students at other campuses have a positive collegiate experience and persist to graduation.

**Definition of Key Terms**

- *Experiential Learning*: Learning that is particularly hands-on and occurs outside of the classroom (Gilbert, Banks, Houser, Rhodes, & Lees, 2014).
- *High-Impact Practices*: Academic practices that have a greater impact than the typical curriculum, often at a more challenging level (McMahan, 2015).
· **Honors Program**: A more rigorous and challenging course of study that supplements the traditional college curriculum (Bowman & Culver, 2018).

· **Living-Learning Community**: A residential community at a college campus intentionally designed for meaningful learning opportunities for the residents, students may be grouped by commonalities such as major or enrollment in an honors program (Dunn & Dean, 2013).

· **Sense of Belonging**: Feeling that an individual is a member of a community or group (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017).

· **Students of Color**: Students from non-White, underrepresented backgrounds in higher education, with the capitalization intentional following other scholars who use the capitalization of this term to push for social justice (Kholi, 2008).

**Summary**

This study was divided into five chapters. Chapter One provided an overview of honors programs, and it stated the problem and the reasons for the importance of studying experiences of honors students from the perspective of successful Students of Color in these institutions. This chapter highlighted the purpose of the study, its significance to the field of higher education, and the goals of this research project. Chapter Two provides a review of the relevant literature and describes the theoretical framework that was used in this study in order to understand the lived experience of participating in a racially diverse honors program from the perspective of Students of Color attending such an institution. Chapter Three includes the proposed research design, approaches to data collection, data analysis, and limitations of the study. Chapter Four will provide detailed introductions of the participants, as well as thematic descriptions of the findings.
of the study. Chapter Five will include a discussion of the findings, limitations, and suggestions for future research.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This chapter synthesizes literature related to the experiences of high-achieving Students of Color in post-secondary education settings in the United States with a special focus on students in honors programs. In this chapter, I explore relevant existing research related to this topic to provide context for where this current study will fit into gaps within existing knowledge. This literature review was organized as follows: historical context concerning educational obstacles for Students of Color, modern educational obstacles for Students of Color, the experiences of Students of Color with honors education, and unpacking theoretical framework of sense of belonging that was used as the foundation for this study.

There is an emphasis on research for Students of Color who struggle on college campuses (Welton & Martinez, 2014), but there has been less of a spotlight on the experiences of Students of Color who are doing exceptionally well (Hughes, 2010). With a few notable exceptions based on Students of Color in honors programs in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Gasman, Fluker, Commodore, & Peterkin, 2014), most honors research is generalized around the experiences of White students (Reddick et al., 2017). However, while many honors programs still have an underrepresentation of Students of Color in their honors programs (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.), there has been a growth in the numbers of Students of Color in honors programs that has been largely ignored in research (Klos, 2018). The research that has been done illustrates student experiences with issues such as tokenism, imposter syndrome, and lack of representation (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007).

The term Students of Color was used throughout this paper to refer to students from racial identities other than from White backgrounds as an all-encompassing term including students who identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latinx,
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or multiracial. While Students of Color face many of the same issues, groups of different people have varied backgrounds and histories, and not all information will be applicable for all students. Even within the same racial group, students can have vastly different experiences due to individual family circumstances. Some issues, such as being a first-generation or low-income student, can also apply to White students, while other issues such as systemic discrimination may not.

Educational Obstacles for Students of Color

This section provides historical and modern context for the history of the systemic educational obstacles faced by Students of Color, as well as issues existing in the present day. The experiences of Black and Latinx Students of Color are particularly emphasized. By providing a historical framework, modern obstacles can be better understood in context.

Black Students 1776 - 1954

An issue that almost exclusively has had long-reaching adverse effects on Students of Color is the ongoing systemic legacy of the enslavement of Black Persons of Color. The enslavement of Black persons in the early days of the United States has had many repercussions throughout the years for society; one of the most relevant regarding this paper is the long-term effects on the educational system, even long after the practice of slavery was abolished (Bertocchi & Dimico, 2014). Enslaved persons were, in many cases, forbidden from even learning how to read and write, with harsh consequences for those who did learn these skills (Bly, 2008). The system of slavery in the United States ended after the Civil War with the passage of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865 (Sabato, 2015). Though the institution of slavery may have been formally abolished, this did not mean that society was equalized. Black persons were legally excluded from many White spaces throughout the country,
including educational institutions; Black students were able to attend school, but in many places, they were only allowed to attend institutions for People of Color (Miletsky, 2017). Slavery may have ended, but that did not mean that People of Color had achieved a full level of equality in society, including in the realm of educational opportunities for students.

The system of racially segregated public education was fought against in the 1954 Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education, in which the right for all students to attend school in an integrated public school setting was won (Lopez & Burciaga, 2014). After half-hearted measures to implement the mandates of the Brown v. Board of Education ruling left many Black students still attending highly segregated schools, the 1968 Supreme Court case Green v. County School Board of New Kent County mandated that more effective measures be taken to desegregate school districts (Reardon & Owens, 2014). Following these measures, desegregation reached a peak in the 1980s but has since gradually begun to increase again, with percentages of Black students in predominantly Student of Color environments rising once again (Reardon & Owens, 2014). Instead of segregation by law, other driving forces have been involved, such as the White flight from urban areas into suburban ones, relaxation in oversights of educational integration, and clustering populations on racial lines (Logan, Zhang, & Oakley, 2017). These additional forces thus have created an environment full of obstacles toward student enrollment and retention in higher education.

Black Students 1955 - 2019

Now that federal oversight of racial integration has decreased, many school districts are becoming resegregated; only instead of legislation, it is now due to demographics and school choice (Heilig & Holme, 2013). With fewer oversights on school districts to implement policies, such as busing students to different school zones to make public schools more racially balanced,
public schools once again grew more racially divided (Logan, Zhang, & Oakley, 2017). In the United States today, the vast majority of White students attend school in predominantly White settings, with Students of Color tending to be in racially homogenized settings as well (Gandara, 2010). In a quantitative study based on longitudinal NELS statistics, Goldsmith (2009) reviewed data to find what correlations exist between racially segregated schools and long-term educational success. Findings showed that for the students in the study, attending a school with a dominant Student of Color population was correlated with dramatically reduced numbers of students with a high school diploma by 26, as opposed to students who attended predominantly White schools (6 out of 100 vs. 30 out of 100), even if the Students of Color were themselves from economically disadvantaged households (Goldsmith, 2009). The study also looked at the attainment of bachelor's degrees, and even for students from wealthier families in the study, being in predominantly Student of Color institution was correlated with lower chances of having a completed college education (Goldsmith, 2009). Education in the United States differs for students of different racial demographics, with Students of Color being at a distinct disadvantage in comparison to White students. Division of schools along racial lines can be particularly problematic due to the perceived value of schools with populations predominantly of Color, which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as many parents make decisions for their students’ education based on perceived quality and long-term impact on the educational future of their children (Roda & Wells, 2013). Fairness aside, it is logical that parents will want the best for their children, even if other students have been denied those opportunities.

To combat parental perceptions and retain White students in public school enrollment, some school administrators get creative in their efforts. For example, in a qualitative study looking at parental choices in school enrollment in New York City, researchers found that gifted
and talented education programs were a useful tool for public schools to keep White families with a high socioeconomic status enrolled in public school systems that otherwise would opt-out for private options (Roda & Wells, 2013). While many of the parents in the study professed sentiments of wanting racial equality in society, they also had the competing desire of wanting the best possible education for their children, and parents in the study expressed concerns that schools with high populations of Students of Color were not likely to be of high quality, thus wanting to put their children in other schools (Roda & Wells, 2013). By providing some gifted and talented education options where the school district could market a specialized education within the public school system, some families were enticed to stay (Roda & Wells, 2013). An argument could be made that perhaps the children from the White families were more qualified for specialized education and that such programs are thus merely providing for needs in the district. However, researchers have found after looking at racial compositions in gifted and education programs, and due to issues with how these programs are conducted, White students are proportionately overrepresented while Students of Color tend to be underrepresented (Ford & Whiting, 2016). In a quantitative analysis of the proportional representation of Black students in gifted education programs (Ford & King, 2014), the authors used a tool called the Relative Difference in Composition Index to find percentages of underrepresentation in gifted programs. Even when making allowances for differentials such as high socioeconomic status, findings demonstrated that Black students are still more underrepresented in public gifted education programs than could be expected due to statistical chance (Ford & King, 2014). Specialized opportunities for students do not end with gifted programs in elementary school; it continues at higher levels as well.
Students who are in gifted education programs in elementary school are more prepared for a rigorous high school curriculum including such things as Advanced Placement (AP) classes, so if students are not identified by a teacher early on, their access to college is more limited than it would be otherwise (Ford & Whiting, 2016). This system of funneling students in these academic tracks is problematic because of the high reliance on teacher recommendations and parental knowledge to get students into these programs, with teachers being less likely to refer Students of Color to gifted programs (Ford & Whiting, 2016). Thus, a reliance on teacher recommendations can have a substantial impact on the future educational trajectory for Students of Color.

A remedy for this can be to have universal screening for all children in a school to test levels of giftedness, as opposed to relying on teacher recommendation or parental request (Card & Giuliano, 2016). Quantitative analysis by Card and Giuliano (2016) on an experimental universal screening program in a school district showed that when all students were screened for giftedness levels, the number of Students of Color who then entered the program dramatically increased, as opposed to the prior system of teacher referral, where Students of Color were vastly underrepresented in gifted classes. By removing the barriers of both teacher biases and parental intervention, more students can receive quality instruction and have increased opportunities for access to college.

The quality of educational offerings for students at the primary and secondary level matters, because it can help set students up for success with the college admissions and application process. For example, due to the practice at some schools of weighting GPA scales so that advanced courses such as AP sections help students get higher GPAs, these students have a more competitive college admissions application in comparison to students who only took
regular high school classes (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009). Students who take AP courses do tend to have success in college, and there was a push from the George W. Bush administration to increase the number of these classes offered (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009). Due to systemic issues, the students who could benefit most from such things as gifted education and advanced high school courses are the ones least likely to be receiving these benefits, thus leading to widening societal gulfs between Students of Color and White students.

**Latinx Students 1848 - 1954**

After the Mexican-American War ended, people living in the newly acquired land were given citizenship in the *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo* in 1848 (Powers & Patton, 2008). However, this did not stop discrimination against Latinx People of Color, including in the realm of education. This educational discrimination was particularly widespread throughout the Southwestern and Western United States, such as in Texas, California, and Arizona (Powers, 2008). In some cases, this meant either having students sent to completely different schools, while in others, it meant placing children of Latinx origin in separate classes within the same school as White students (Garcia, Yosso, & Barajas, 2012). The practice of segregating Latinx Students of Color was challenged in a number of court cases in the states, including in California (*Westminster School District of Orange County et al. v. Mendez et al.*, 1947) and Arizona (*Gonzalez v. Sheely*, 1951). While these court cases may not be as famous as *Brown v. Board of Education* (Oliver Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka, et al., 1954), they do illustrate that racial segregation has been an issue in United States education for multiple segments of the population.
Latinx Students 1955 - 2019

Currently, the majority of Latinx Students of Color in the United States are United States citizens (Stringer, 2018), even though their parents may or may not be (Amuedo-Dorantes & Lopez, 2017). However, these Students of Color may still face discrimination due to stereotypes and beliefs concerning the academic capabilities of Latinx persons as a group (Achinstein, Curry, & Ogawa, 2015; Owens & Lynch, 2012). Even though some of these Latinx Students of Color may have family that has lived in the United States for generations, these students may continue to face a number of very real issues, such as: higher levels of poverty (Schmeer, 2012), language barriers (Olson, Matuchniak, Chung, Stumpf, & Farkas, 2017), being more likely to attend schools with fewer resources (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2015) and being more likely to be first-generation college students (Latino et al. 2018). All of these issues combined serve to make college access and retention issues of concern in terms of the collegiate success of students from Latinx families.

Asian Students 1850 - 2019

Asian American Students of Color simultaneously deal with issues in common with other People of Color, such as racial discrimination (Liu & Wong, 2018; Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018), and colorism (Ryabov, 2016) while also having a more privileged status in society by statistically being overrepresented in higher education, including at the graduate level (Henfield, Woo, Lin, & Rausch, 2014). This has led to the concept of the “model minority” with the idea being if Asian Americans can do it, so can other racial groups, and is used as an argument by some against the concept of affirmative action in education (Poon & Segoshi, 2018).

Immigration policies have been an integral part of both past and present educational paths for Asian American Students of Color. Though initially utilized as a source of cheap labor,
Congress implemented anti-Asian immigration policies, including the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which curtailed immigration from China, as well as later policies that policymakers devised that made emigrating from other Asian areas such as Japan and India difficult. (Lee E., 2007). As a result, immigration slowed down from Asian regions for several years. However, for children of immigrants who did make it into the United States, some issues regarding access to public schools arose.

The largest group of early immigrants from Asia to the United States was particularly persons from China, and the vast majority of these Persons of Color ended up in California, so some exclusionary educational policies were made at the state and city level, and not the federal level (Kuo, 1998). In the 1880s, judges in the court system mandated that all children in the state could attend public school regardless of race; however, school trustees were authorized by state lawmakers to set up separate public schools for students of Asian descent (An, 2017). Though there were a few court cases where Chinese families fought for the right to attend the White schools, these were ultimately unsuccessful (An, 2017). Japanese families, many of whom came in later immigration waves than Chinese migrants, eventually had some success in fighting for educational rights, due to negotiations between the governments of the United States and Japan, with agreements to curtail future Japanese emigration to the United States as part of the agreement (An, 2017). Ironically, while Japanese migrants had better results in getting equal educational access, they not long thereafter lost their status in the aftermath of World War II. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japanese forces, a strong anti-Japanese sentiment swept throughout the United States (Stanley, 1992), and President Franklin D. Roosevelt mandated that persons of Japanese descent be placed into internment camps during the duration of the war with the Japanese exclusion order (Okawa, 2011). As it became clear that internment of Japanese
American Students of Color were going to remain in internment camps for some time, school facilities were set up; the children were also encouraged to participate in mainstream White American activities, such as football, scouting, and dances to encourage assimilation into White American culture after the ending of the war (Tong, 2004). Once the war was over, federal officials worked to resettle the camp prisoners throughout the United States, with many families being moved to other areas away from their old cultural ties and strongly encouraged to assimilate into their new surroundings (Nagata, 2015).

Immigration waves after World War II included refugees from the military conflict in Vietnam (Goyal, 2018), but a shift happened due to changes in immigration policy that favored applicants with needed skills and advanced education (Chen G. A., 2018). Thus, the majority of Asian immigrants changed from coming from lower socio-economic classes to highly skilled and educated workers from higher socio-economic backgrounds, particularly in STEM fields, tipping the educational scales (Lee J., 2015). Therefore, the people tending to be immigrating tend to be those who already have advanced education and skills. This surge of highly educated persons being added to the pool of persons of Asian descent in the United States, thus increasing the average education and income level for the whole group (Lueck, 2018) and helped lead to the stereotype of the Asian “model minority” category (Kim & Sakamoto, 2014).

In many cases, these high expectations for educational success and advancement are also part of a family and cultural mindset (Peng & Wright, 1994) for many Asian Students of Color. Moreover, many Asian families may be very conscientious about their children being exposed to educational enrichment outside of the classroom, regardless of socioeconomic status (Lee & Zhou, 2014). However, not all Asian Americans have the same privileges and backgrounds, and the success of the crowd can be problematic for those who are struggling, as they may not be
thought of as someone who needs assistance due to the overall group success (Paik, Kula, Saito, Rahman, & Witenstein, 2014). While many Asian Americans may fit the model minority stereotype, the oversimplification of the Asian American experience can be detrimental to those who fall between the cracks.

**Native American Students 1790 - 2019**

Educational initiatives for Native American Students of Color have a long and sordid history in the United States. In the early years after the American Revolutionary War, starting in 1790, Christian missionaries began to form schools as a means of spreading dominance of the English language, American customs, and indoctrination into Christian belief systems (Gregg, 2018). As White American settlers began the long march of American civilization toward the western shores of the United States, Native Americans began to be pushed out of the way onto reservations (Perdue, 2012). Schools were founded and funded by the United States government on and near reservations to educate the Native American Students of Color, with the Native American Students of Color learning the ways of their people at home and the ways of the White American government at school (Gregg, 2018). Different values can cause tension, and one way to deal with this is to remove a set of influences so that students are raised in only one culture.

Eventually, administrators in the United States government decided to run boarding schools to have the opportunity to train Native American students in the ways of White culture away from their families and tribal leaders, with the first of these schools, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, opening in 1879 (Bess, 2017). By having Native American Students of Color board away from home, tight control could be ensured, and training in White culture could more effectively take place. The goal of cultural change was also enforced through banning the use of
Native American languages at many of the schools, with students being harshly punished if caught speaking any language other than English (Fischer & Stoddard, 2013).

Currently, the racial group with the highest high school dropout rate in the United States is that of Native American students (Wilcox, 2015). Recent data indicates that only 72% of Native American students who started high school in 2010-2011 graduated in 2015-2016, as opposed to 88% of White students (Public High School Graduation Rates, 2018). Dropping out of high school can have serious long-term repercussions for Students of Color, both in their future earning potential (Campbell C., 2015) and in potentially shutting these students out from being able to enter collegiate education without some additional preparation (Rossi & Bower, 2018). To date, Native American students are some of the least likely Students of Color to attend college and complete college degrees, as well as the most impoverished population of Students of Color in the United States (Mosholder & Goslin, 2013). Given the U.S. legacy of controlling educational choices for Native American students, it is particularly troubling to note the seeming ineffectiveness this system has had in terms of successfully launching Native American Students of Color through high school graduation, let alone college enrollment.

**Racial Disadvantages and Racial Advantages**

While the days of openly legal segregation in the United States education system may be officially over, systemic disadvantages may still be in place for students of certain racial backgrounds in comparison to White students. While technically access is equal, that does not mean it applies in practice. For instance, this inequity, in reality, can be seen in the disproportionately high number of students in the United States from Black and Latinx families that are also part of low socioeconomic status (SES) households (Walpole et al., 2005). For instance, several studies have looked at the score disparity where White students do better on the
SAT entrance exam than do students from other racial groups (Card & Rothstein, 2007; Walpole et al., 2005). Students from White families are also more likely overall to be more economically secure than their peers in Black and Latinx families (Alba & Barbosa, 2015). In the United States, White students are more likely than students from other racial groups to have a family history of higher education (Fischer M. J., 2007). Several studies have looked at the score disparity where White students do better on the SAT entrance exam than do students from other racial groups (Card & Rothstein, 2007; Walpole et al., 2005). Students from White families are also more likely overall to be more economically secure than their peers in Black and Latinx families (Alba & Barbosa, 2015). In the United States, White students are more likely than students from other racial groups to have a family history of higher education (Fischer M. J., 2007). Even if families are not necessarily wealthy or have a history of higher education, they may still be able to have built cultural capital in other ways that can help their children succeed in a university setting.

Systemic Educational Obstacles for Students of Color

This section provides a modern context for the current systemic educational obstacles. In addition to issues faced by Students of Color in general, this section emphasizes areas where additional factors, such as being a first-generation college student, can lead to further difficulties for Students of Color. By providing a modern context, current obstacles can be better understood, as well as show the need for research in under-studied topics.

Cultural Capital and Social Capital

Cultural capital is a form of symbolic currency that can be used, particularly by the wealthy, to gain other forms of power, such as ensuring children receive a quality education (Kosutic, 2017). Parents who have a history of higher education have more knowledge of what
needs to be done and can use that cultural capital to the advantage of their offspring (Buchmann, Condron, & Roscigno, 2010). Social capital can be thought of as fabric that weaves social networks and associations together, and attending school is an early way of building a social network outside of the immediate family structure (Huang, Maassen van den Brink, & Groot, 2009). Students who live in communities where they have the opportunity to network and prepare for college and exams have an advantage due to social capital (Park, 2012). Students who have the opportunity to attend a university get a chance to increase their family social and cultural capital (Hill, Bregman, & Andrade, 2015).

**Social Reproduction Theory**

Social reproduction is a theory explaining how parents pass on the ability to maintain their socioeconomic standing in society, and one of the ways that this can be done is through securing a quality education for offspring (James, 2013). Advantaged students, who come from families that have a history of participation in higher education, have the additional advantage of also being more likely to achieve high levels of education themselves - thanks in part to parental guidance and influence (Burger & Walk, 2016). Social reproduction maintains the attainment gaps among students and deepens the social inequality across generations. Students in these families with a history of higher education have social capital gained from family and other networks to help them succeed, thus continuing the cycle of social reproduction into another generation (Park & Becks, 2015). Students from lower-income families tend to score lower on the SAT, and the income disparity is exacerbated when the student is Black, as opposed to White (Dixon-Roman, Everson, & McArdle, 2013).
First-Generation College Students

Parents who themselves have college educations tend to be better able to advocate and assist their children throughout their educational journey, from primary to collegiate level education, compared to first-generation college students navigating the journey through college with less support (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). For many systemic reasons, in the United States, Persons of Color are much less likely than White persons to have completed a college education (Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008). As a result, many first-generation students pursuing a college education are more likely to be Students of Color than they are to be White (McCoy, 2014). Additionally, many, though not necessarily all, of these students are also from low-income households; thus, these students have fewer financial resources, which can affect educational decisions and the overall experiences that these students have during their college years (Means & Pyne, 2017).

For some first-generation college students, familial support for the concept of going to college may be in place, but for parents who have no experience with college themselves, having the ability to provide meaningful assistance to their students may be difficult (Fann, Jarsky, & McDonough, 2009). Other students, however, face resistance and rejection from family and friends, as they are forging a new path that is different from their cultural norm and thus may be entering a different social class (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). Regardless, whether these students have familial support or rejection of their educational choices, the families of these students are not likely to have as much knowledge of the collegiate process as students from White families that have a history of family college attendance (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Therefore, support from teachers and colleges are essential pieces of the college success of these underrepresented students.
There are many ways that educational community members can show support for first-generation college students and their families to help make the college-going process an easier one. For example, education faculty members at a university saw a need in the Latinx community surrounding their university for parental education regarding the college application and admission process, and created and conducted a series of workshops to provide the Latinx parents in the community with the information and resources needed to be informed concerning the college application process for their children (Fann, Jarsky, & McDonough, 2009). By assessing a need in the community surrounding the university, educators were able to make a difference by providing information that families needed to be able to apply to college successfully.

A qualitative study focusing on Latinx families in southern Texas was conducted by researchers wanting to learn more about social capital and the college-going process for potential first-generation college students from immigrant families (Chlup, Gonzalez, & Gonzalez, 2018). For the families in the study, the desire for the parents for their children to build good futures for themselves through a college education was strong, but due to the lack of familiarity with the college process, the families did not have the social capital to adequately help their children (Chlup, Gonzalez, & Gonzalez, 2018). These issues were further exacerbated by many of the participants possessing Spanish as their first language and having a lack of familiarity with English (Chlup, Gonzalez, & Gonzalez, 2018). The researchers offered the ideas of focusing on the strengths of family ties and resilience that these students bring to the table and providing more community and school resources to assist these families as their students consider going to college. A quantitative study on the role of cultural support in making decisions concerning college attendance was conducted by a researcher looking at several different factors for Black
students and their significance (Muhammad, 2008). When considering whether to go to college, significant factors for students included peer influence, parental (especially maternal) support, and the nudging of a school counselor to consider and plan for college. In the discussion, the author makes the argument that school counselors can be particularly effective at influencing Students of Color who have the potential to be first-generation college students, but that typically school counselors have less time and availability in schools where they are most needed.

College Choice

Students of Color are more likely than White students to select a community college as their enrollment choice for higher education following high school graduation (Mooring & Mooring, 2016). Community colleges often are also chosen as an option as this will allow these students to stay close to home and family, often a critical value for Students of Color from Latinx families (Chen & Zerquera, 2018). Community colleges are also typically much less expensive than both public and private universities (Cochrane, 2015). Community colleges are also often open-access institutions, meaning that practically any adult can attend, regardless of educational deficiencies; however, if students are academically unprepared for college-level work, they may be required to take developmental level classes before taking college-level coursework (Gabbard & Mupinga, 2013). Taking the time and effort to do developmental coursework is valuable time that is lost concerning college completion (Mills & Mills, 2018), making the pathway toward a college diploma a longer and more rocky one for students who deal with this issue in their educational journey.

Some Students of Color may make deliberate educational and social choice to attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). While prior generations of Students of Color did not have as much choice in the matter and may have attended an HBCU as a matter of
necessity, some Students of Color today consciously choose this educational option because they want to be in an academic and community environment with predominantly other Students of Color (Van Camp, Barden, & Sloan, 2010). HBCU institutions have an extremely high success rate concerning graduation rates of students, as well as the numbers of Students of Color who go on to enter into doctoral programs (Mykerezi & Mills, 2008). Attending an HBCU provides an opportunity for students to hold numerous campus leadership positions, learn from Faculty of Color, and take part in a vibrant network of Alumni of Color, all opportunities that are not as likely if students choose to attend a Primarily White Institution (PWI) (Jones, 2013). For all of these reasons, many Students of Color still choose to attend HBCU institutions, even though they now also have other options available to them when choosing where to attend college.

In contrast, Students of Color who choose to attend college at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), classified as colleges with 25% or more enrollments of Latinx students, often have other reasons for making this choice; this is often due to practicality, such as in geographic proximity to home and cost in comparison to other college options, even if these students are academically competitive enough to attend more selective institutions (Freeman, 2017). Some of the same benefits that students at HBCUs have, in terms of many other students of similar racial backgrounds and additional supports exist, albeit not quite to the same extent, but more so than if students attend a PWI (Flores & Park, 2015). However, unlike at HBCUs, where many of the faculty and staff members are Scholars of Color, faculty members and staff at HSI are not necessarily going to be Latinx in origin, as the designation is based upon student enrollment figures, not historical reasons for starting these institutions, so the mission of these two types of institutions differ somewhat.
Honors Programs in the United States

This section provides information concerning the history and purpose of honors programs in the United States. The use of honors programs for purposes such as recruitment and retention, promoting undergraduate research, and building a sense of community is discussed. In addition, the topic of experiences of Students of Color in honors programs are is discussed, including experiences that have different levels of racial diversity.

History of Honors Programs

The development of the Rhodes scholarship and the opportunity for college graduates from the United States to continue their education at Oxford University in England is widely regarded as a catalyst for the development of the early honors movement in the United States (Rinn, 2006). The Rhodes Scholarship, still one of the most highly regarded scholarships for college graduates in the United States, was established by Sir Cecil Rhodes with the intention of promoting excellent scholarship and increasing international goodwill by bringing together top students from different countries to learn together at Oxford University (Rinn, 2006). As a result of studying abroad at Oxford University, Rhodes Scholars were exposed to the British form of elite education, where students were exposed to great books, and relied heavily on independent reading and research under the mentorship of faculty to have an intense, but rich, learning experience (Cohen, 1966). Several of the earliest Rhodes Scholars from the United States went on to become faculty members at universities in the United States, and many of them incorporated aspects of their learning experience at Oxford University into their universities for their high-achieving students (Rinn, 2006). Chief among this group of early United States Rhodes Scholars was Frank Aydelotte, widely considered to be the predecessor of the modern honors movement in the United States, as he, along with several other Rhodes Scholars, created...
honors programs inspired by the tutorial system that they had experienced at Oxford University (Rinn, 2006).

Wars and the Great Depression led to a waning interest in the honors movement, but interest was revived by Sputnik and the threat of the Cold War with the Soviet Union; this second and foundational wave for the modern honors movement was led by Joseph Cohen, who not only revived interest in honors but created and formulated improvements, such as formalizing standards for what is expected to be offered by an honors program (Rinn, 2006). Cohen led an organization called the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICCS), which was formed to promote comparable standards of honors excellence in universities in the United States (Cohen, 1966). ICCS led to the creation of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), which is the current organization that sets the national standard for expectations of excellence in honors education in the United States (Rinn, 2006). NCHC publishes the Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council, which is a double-blind peer-reviewed journal (JNCHC Editorial Policy).

**Recruiting and Retention Tool**

For university administrators wishing to make their institution a more appealing option to bright students with high scores on standardized exams and with stellar high school records, highlighting their honors program, and perhaps attaching funding for specific honors scholarships to entice these students who may be eligible for a more selective institution to consider theirs instead (Seifert, Pascarella, Colangelo, & Assouline, 2007). An honors program, by design, allows honors students to have opportunities such as smaller class sizes, research opportunities, and access to additional resources (Campbell K. C., 2005). For high-achieving students making the choice between an admissions offer at a large public institution with a
decent ranking, versus a more selective institution with a higher ranking, the more specialized honors opportunities may be appealing as they provide the potential for the student to stand out more, whereas at a more elite institution there is less opportunity to shine in the face of greater competition from other high-achieving students (Rinn, 2005).

Recruiting students and incentivizing them to enroll is an early step in the university cycle, another being the retention of enrolled students until graduation. A benefit to a university having an honors program is the possibility of attracting more students of a higher caliber, who will not only raise the standards for university admission but graduation and retention as well. As honors students tend to be of a higher caliber (Singell & Tang, 2012), and are statistically more likely to graduate within six years, even when compared to other high-ability students who are not in honors (Keller & Lacy, 2013), these students may be valuable to university administrators who wish to increase rankings related to retention and timely graduation. As the admissions process continues to become more competitive, an honors program can be a way for university administrators to add high-achievers to their student bodies. Although it may include some additional investments to enhance their education, some university administrators may find that the overall benefits to the university for ranking and retention outweigh the additional trouble of fostering an honors program for a select group of students, as the whole university benefits from improvements in retention and rankings status.

Undergraduate Research

A key feature of honors education at many universities is the opportunity, and often a requirement, to conduct undergraduate research with faculty members (Stanford & Shattell, 2010). For university administrators, this is important because research is a big factor in rankings; for faculty, this is attractive because it gives them the opportunity to work with
motivated undergraduate students; and, for honors students, this is beneficial because it allows them to access the world of research much earlier than they may have been able to otherwise (Seifert, Pascarella, Colangelo, & Assouline, 2007). Students may also have an advantage when applying to post-secondary education programs, as undergraduate students who already have a proven track record of being able to do research may be more attractive recruits to a graduate program later on in their academic careers (Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002). Some university administrators feel strongly enough about the importance of undergraduate research that they set aside funds for undergraduates to pursue research, enticing students with the prospect of funding in addition to experience (Sederberg, 2005).

Community

At some honors programs, a key feature is honors-only housing, whether that be a wing, a floor, or an entire residence hall devoted exclusively to honors students (Rinn, 2004). This housing provides honors a synergetic community setting with other students who have a similar dedication to academic pursuits (Rinn, 2004). At some institutions, the honors program residence hall may have the additional benefit of having a planned learning community, with students strategically placed by major, and sometimes the inclusion of classrooms and office spaces. Such communities provide students an experience of truly living and learning with a group of their peers in an honors program while having greater access to honors staff and faculty (Wawrzynski, Madden, & Jensen, 2012). Students who live off-campus or in non-honors housing may still have many social opportunities associated with their honors program. Many honors programs provide students with a council or club where the students have the chance to work and mingle with other students (Hebert & McBee, 2007). These gatherings provide a social and often service component to the honors program and present students the opportunity to interact with other
students they otherwise not due to being in different majors. This interaction between honors students can provide both formal and informal opportunities for interdisciplinary research and study and helps to form a better-rounded student by exposing students to high-achievers housed in a variety of other majors (Hebert & McBee, 2007).

**Students of Color in Honors Programs**

Students of Color tend to be disproportionately underrepresented in honors education, even more so than in higher education in general (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.). As a result, the vast majority of research available on honors students tends to be focused by default on White students, who are overrepresented statistically in honors education (Reddick et al., 2017). For Black students attending Primarily White Institutions (PWI), the honors experience can be fulfilling but also frustrating, as they may have to deal with stereotypes concerning the capabilities of Black students, as well as deal with the urge to prove that they belong on their own merits, and not because of affirmative action policies (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Beyond the challenges faced by any Student of Color in an honors program, female Students of Color may face additional challenges due to the intersection of their gender identity and their racial identity (Davis, 2018). In a study focusing on Black honors students, researcher Griffin (2006) examined factors of success for honors students in this demographic and found that internal motivation, encouragement from parents to be successful, and a desire to overcome stereotypes were some of the common driving forces for these students that aided in their academic success.

One way around dealing with feelings of stereotypes is for Black students to attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), where the opportunity to be involved in honors education is an opportunity to have support from peer mentors as well as have specialized living community options for honors; high-achieving students at these HBCUs get a chance to
truly have a transformative educational experience, not just from a racial perspective, but from an intellectual one as well, while still feeling like they fit in on the campus (Gasman, Fluker, Commodore, & Peterkin, 2014). Due to the exclusion of Black students by administrators at PWIs, Black leaders founded HBCUs, and there is still a strong tradition of high-achieving students attending these institutions, even though many of these students could attend other top universities. Honors education at an HBCU provides the opportunity to combine getting a rigorous education with participating in what is now a cherished cultural tradition for Black families who have a history of attending collegiate level institutions (Mitchell, 2002).

In addition to membership in the national and regional branches of the NCHC, HBCU institutions may also be affiliated with the National Association of African American Honors Programs (NAAHP), which contains specialized programming, such as leadership training and debate (Davis & Montgomery, 2011). Qualitative researchers have sought to build a comprehensive picture of the state of honors education in the U.S. in HBCU institutions through a study that was sent out to the 45 out of 105 HBCU institutions that house honors programs (Gasman, Fluker, Commodore, & Peterkin, 2014). Some notable findings include that the vast majority of respondents noting that they have either formal or informal mentoring programs in place, which is important for high-achieving students in general, but even more so for Students of Color who have fewer representations in higher education. With a lack of diversity in many honors settings, Students of Color may then feel out of place, and not have a strong sense of belonging in their honors program.

**Theoretical Framework**

Many different theorists and scholars have developed frameworks for understanding the concept of the human need to belong (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maslow, 1970). In addition to the
basic need for connection, college students have different concerns and perspectives, and those who face extra obstacles, such as Students of Color, may have an even greater need to connect with others. The theoretical framework that guided my study was the sense of belonging for college students’ model proposed by Strayhorn (Strayhorn, 2019). Sense of belonging for college students has been referred to by Strayhorn as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness...on campus” (Strayhorn, 2019, pp. 28-29). Other researchers have used sense of belonging to study experiences faced by college students, such as how ethnicity-based cultural groups can be beneficial for Students of Color at a Predominantly White Institution (Museus, 2008) and how the perception of campus culture attitudes of acceptance toward racial diversity impact the sense of belonging for Students of Color (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). By building his theoretical model on the basis of previous researchers, Strayhorn was able to add to the existing body of literature on the topic, and I continued that trajectory with this study.

One of the guiding influences behind Strayhorn’s (2019) theoretical model is an adaptation of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970) for the lives of college students. Maslow’s model was based upon the necessity of lower-order needs such as safety and shelter being met before higher-level ones such as affection (Maslow, 1970). Essentially, persons tend to prioritize needs, and when persons do not have basic needs met, they are not likely to be able to focus on higher-level ones. Strayhorn looked at the idea that a college student must also have basic needs such as safety and security met before higher-level needs, such as a sense of belonging and engagement within the campus community, could be addressed (Strayhorn, 2019).

In addition to the work of Maslow, Strayhorn (2019) credited two sets of researchers with foundational background for his work. The first of these is the work of Vincent Tinto,
particularly Tinto’s book on student retention from 1993 (Tinto, 1993). Throughout the book, Tinto explores what makes students either be retained at an institution or lost for a number of reasons. Tinto made compelling arguments on the need for students to build academic and social bonds with others. For Students of Color, Tinto noted that groups related to their cultural and racial heritage could be an important source of social connection on a large campus. For honors students, Tinto noted that while they may be very capable academically, they might also thus fall outside campus norms, and need additional programming, just as do other nontraditional groups. Through a focus on building a sense of belonging, both academically and socially, students can foster connections to their college campuses.

The second great influence upon Strayhorn (2019), in building his theoretical model, was the work of Hurtado and Carter (1997) on the concept of building a sense of belonging. These researchers followed up on the work of Tinto (1993) by developing a model specifically on the experiences of Latinx students, using longitudinal data from the National Survey of Hispanic Students (NSHS), reviewing student experiences and perceptions of the presence of racial hostility on their respective campuses (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In their discussion, Hurtado and Carter noted that additional research might be warranted into different types of educational opportunities to allow Students of Color to build a sense of belonging, and Strayhorn’s (2019) work and this proposed study both would fit that need.

With the creation of the college students’ sense of belonging model, Strayhorn was able to create a guide to show the student level of comfort on a college campus, closely mirroring the layers in Maslow’s hierarchy (Strayhorn, 2019). The crux of this model is that when students have their basic needs met on their campus, such as a sense of safety, shelter, and food, their attention then turns to more advanced level of needs, such as the need to have a sense of
belonging in one’s community (Strayhorn, 2019). This model is a particularly good fit for this study, as the goal of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Students of Color in racially diverse honors settings, students’ perceptions of this environment, and their thoughts concerning a sense of belonging at their university. There are seven core components to the sense of belonging model (Strayhorn, 2019), which are discussed below.

1. “Sense of belonging is a basic human need (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 29).” Strayhorn (2019) looked to Maslow’s hierarchy and considered belonging to be above the most basic needs, such as shelter and nourishment, but before the highest levels needs. Before full self-actualization can be achieved, the need for belonging must be met (Strayhorn, 2019). Thus, students will not be at their highest level of capacity if they do not belong anywhere on campus.

2. “Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 32).” The need to belong is strong enough so that students may either be moved in positive or negative ways (Strayhorn, 2019). For some students, this could mean taking positive steps, such as running for a leadership position, for others; however, there may be pressure to do things that are morally wrong, or even illegal, non-sanctioned activities, such as hazing.

3. “Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (a) in certain contexts ... (b) at certain times … (c) among certain populations (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 34).” According to Strayhorn (2019), there are times when students may feel a heightened need to belong, such as transitioning to life in college. The need to belong is important throughout human life but can be especially vital when persons feel vulnerable.
4. “Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 36).” According to Strayhorn (2019), perceiving that you are important to others ties into your sense of belonging. If a college student believes, rightly or not, that their presence is not important to others, they will not feel a sense of belonging on their campus.

5. “Social identities intersect and affect college students’ sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 37).” With this point, Strayhorn (2019) elaborates on how students may have complex identities, such as their ethnic background as well as their sexual orientation, and how these identities combine to influence a sense of belonging. In the case of my study, the intersecting identities I explored were how the experiences of simultaneously being a Student of Color as well as a participant in an honors program were involved in a sense of belonging for students.

6. “Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 39).” For college administrators, ensuring persistence and retention of students is a high priority, and according to Strayhorn (2019), one potential benefit of a sense of belonging for college students is staying enrolled. For the purposes of my study, I wanted to see if this concept extended to Students of Color in honors programs as well.

7. “Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 39).” With this point, Strayhorn (2019) notes that a sense of belonging is an ongoing process. For instance, college administrators may make students enroll in a First-Year experience course in order to build a sense of belonging. While that may work for the first year,
students may need to connect to a college campus in other ways as they continue their educational careers.

I chose Strayhorn’s sense of belonging model as it is the best fit for the purpose of this study. By exploring the lived experiences (van Manen, 2016) of Students of Color in terms of what helps and what hinders their sense of belonging in a collegiate honors program. The model by Strayhorn (2019) was chosen for this study because honors programs provide students with both an academic and social homes on college campuses that can help build their sense of belonging and security on campus (Hebert & McBee, 2007; Rinn, 2004). For Students of Color, who are often an underrepresented population in honors programs (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.), the benefits may not be the same as for White students. Using this theory to frame a research study concerning the experiences of Students of Color in a racially diverse honors setting was an appropriate choice for exploring this issue.

Summary

Chapter Two synthesized literature related to the experiences of high-achieving Students of Color in post-secondary education settings in the United States with a special focus on students in honors programs. In this chapter, I explored relevant existing research related to this topic to provide context for where this current study will fit into gaps within existing knowledge and explored the theoretical framework of sense of belonging that I used as the foundation for this study. Previously, Chapter One provided an overview of honors programs, and it stated the problem and the reasons for the importance of studying experiences of honors students from the perspective of successful Students of Color in these institutions. In Chapter Three, I include the research design, approaches to data collection, data analysis, and limitations of the study. Chapter Four will provide detailed introductions of the participants, well as thematic descriptions
of the findings of the study. Chapter Five will include a discussion of the findings, limitations, and suggestions for future research.
Chapter 3: Methods

There is limited research available concerning the experiences of Students of Color who participate in honors programs, let alone the experiences of these students in a diverse honors program (Klos, 2018; Reddick et al., 2017; Scott, 2017). In the following sections, I discuss the research design for my study exploring this topic. The components of the research design included site selection, participant recruitment and selection, data collection, data analysis, and the steps taken to ensure trustworthy findings. Throughout the research, my goal was to use a phenomenological approach to explore their interpretations of their shared experience of being Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program.

Research Design

This research project was a qualitative study looking at the lived experiences of Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program at a large urban public research university. Due to the nature of the issue that I explored as a researcher, I employed qualitative methodology during my research study. Qualitative methodology is based, not on numbers or figures, but on the significance and interpretation that humans give to events and issues in the world around them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While a quantitative study may be more straightforward, some problems may be best understood through the lens of human interpretation, particularly by persons who are insiders on the topic of interest to the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Due to the nature of my study, a qualitative methodology was a better fit than is quantitative methodology.

Phenomenology. Researchers may use different methods for qualitative studies, and the researchers must decide which one to use according to the type of research question being explored several different approaches. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenology
looks at the collective experience of a phenomenon and provides a way to describe what the phenomenon is like for those who have experienced it as a whole. A phenomenon is a collective experience shared by many people. In this case, I examined the phenomenon of the lived experience of honors program Students of Color at a large urban research university. A lived experience is illustrative of the experiences that are meaningful to humanity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology offers an excellent framework for this research study, as I looked at what the experience is like for a group of students overall, and not just provide the perspectives of a few, but built a composite framework of the experiences of multiple people. Different philosophical approaches are used within the context of phenomenological research, including hermeneutic and transcendental approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I will briefly describe hermeneutic phenomenology and then give a historical background concerning this topic.

**Hermeneutic phenomenology.** While the limitation of bias is desirable, some phenomenologists acknowledge that this feat is never entirely possible, and those who adhere to hermeneutic phenomenology focus on the process of interpretation (van Manen, 2016). When focusing on the meaning and interpretation of phenomena, researchers using this method spend time reflecting through writing on the process of their research and how they are interpreting their research subject (van Manen, 2016). Thus, instead of removing biases from the process, researchers can reflect upon how their own experiences and interpretations influence their interpretation of phenomena.

**History of hermeneutic phenomenology.** The etymological foundation for hermeneutics is *hermeneus*, an interpreter, which is why the Greek mythological character Hermes was the name for the messenger of the mythological Greek gods because he had the role of interpreting the divine messages for mere mortals (Jasper, 2004). The origins of the field of study are
considered by many to have been laid out by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (Gadamer, 2006). Aristotle formed the basis for the origins of many of the ideas in Western philosophy and thought, and is still reliable and relevant source even centuries later (Berti, 2011). Hermeneutics has thus been a term used for centuries for the field of interpretation of messages, especially ones considered to be divine that need to be clearly explained to humankind (Palmer, 1969).

Phenomenology is a tool for researchers to examine lived experiences and how people interpret them (van Manen, 2016). The field of phenomenology as a school of thought can be traced back to the much more recent philosopher Edmund Husserl from the turn of the 20th century (Rodemeyer, 2006). Combining the fields of hermeneutics and phenomenology into the field of hermeneutic phenomenology was the work of German philosopher Martin Heidegger (Watson, 1971). A colleague and later successor department chair of Husserl at Freiberg University, Heidegger was well versed in the concepts of phenomenology as set forth by Husserl, yet Heidegger diverged from Husserl’s ideas in some fundamental ways (Laverty, 2003). While Husserl focused on epistemological and transcendental philosophical questions with his procedures of phenomenology, Heidegger was concerned with more ontological questions, primarily discussing the nature of being in the human existence (Schacht, 1972). Following in the footsteps of Heidegger was Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer is connected to Heidegger because he studied under both Heidegger and Husserl, and thus had an understanding of the differences between the two schools of thought (Laverty, 2003). Gadamer chose to side his work in the tradition of Heidegger, expounding upon the idea of interpretation as conversational, and not merely the understanding gained from looking at an issue from one side (Gadamer, 1975). Philosopher Jean Paul Gustave Ricoeur was greatly influenced by Heidegger’s work as he developed his take on hermeneutic phenomenology (Clayton, 1989). Ricoeur expanded upon
Heidegger’s ideas and advocated for the use of the combination of hermeneutics and phenomenology to include reflection as an essential aspect of the intellectual process (Jervolino, 2002). Hermeneutic phenomenology, to put it simply, is a framework for studying how people interpret and make meaning of phenomena in their lives (Laverty, 2003).

**Use of hermeneutic phenomenology.** Hermeneutic phenomenology is relevant and used in several different scholarly areas. Some of the most prominent applications for the method of research outside of philosophy and theology include research in medicine and education. While some researchers consider hermeneutic phenomenology to be more a method of doing research, others argue that hermeneutic phenomenology is also just as valid as a theoretical framework, particularly for adherents of the work of philosopher Ricoeur (Chabrak, 2005; Strawser, 2009; Tan, Wilson, & Olver, 2009). For educational researchers of any level, usage of a hermeneutic phenomenology is a useful tool for exploring the background of students and learning to understand why they are the way that they are (Kim J.-H., 2012). Conversely, the same hermeneutic phenomenology can also be used to study the beliefs and behaviors of teachers as well (Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Glazewski, Newby, & Ertmer, 2010).

Within the field of higher education, my primary area of interest, hermeneutic phenomenology has been used in many ways, such as exploring the experiences of transfer students (Hioki, Lester, & Martinez, 2015), researching the experiences of instructors (De Gagne & Walters, 2010), and illustrating the experiences of students dealing with new technological advances (Rose, 2011). Additionally, hermeneutic phenomenology can be used to study honors programs, such as in the work of scholar Melissa Johnson (Johnson, M. L., 2013). Johnson’s (2013) study covered the interpretations of faculty members who had taught online honors coursework, a shared phenomenon for all these participants.
Hermeneutic phenomenology in honors research. While the terminology may be complex, the essence of the idea is not – hermeneutic phenomenology has, at its core, the philosophical goal of interpretation in context and the illumination of phenomena. Above all else, this philosophical tradition fits nicely with the knowledge that I hoped to gain from this study. I wished to learn the interpretation of a group of people who have all shared a phenomenon. Thus, the theory aligned perfectly with my research aspirations. I was inspired by the work of honors administrator and researcher Melissa Johnson, who used the theoretical framework in her dissertation and subsequent articles based on her dissertation (Johnson M. L., 2013). Johnson (2013) was able to successfully conduct research relating to the interpretations of these faculty members and thus was able to make suggestions to best practices in honors education as a result. The data from these qualitative participants was rich and vivid.

Positionality of the Researcher

Since my goal was to understand and interpret the meaning of a phenomenon, using a hermeneutic phenomenological framework to build this research study was an appropriate choice in this case. My research questions were based on how honors Students of Color describe their experiences, their perceptions of diversity, and their sense of belonging fitting in with using a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenology study. To get the answers to these questions, I relied on students to describe their perceptions of the meaning behind a collective experience these students share. As a qualitative researcher, it is important to explain my positionality on issues (van Manen, 2016). With my background and grounding in my previous courses in philosophy and hermeneutics, I am most closely aligned philosophically with the idea of hermeneutic phenomenology.
From a personal standpoint, I am an alumna of a diverse honors program and greatly enjoyed the experience, finding the environment to be both intellectually as well as culturally stimulating. Being in a very diverse educational environment exposed me to persons, thoughts, and ideas in an organic way that I would not have gone out to seek on my own otherwise. While finding myself as a young adult living away from home for the first time, I found it healthy to be surrounded by others who were raised very differently, as it gave me a chance to be introspective about my beliefs and thoughts. Some of the strongest friendships that I made in my university years were made with peers whom I met through the honors program, many of whom I probably would never have met otherwise.

As a higher education professional, I now have the great privilege of working in a diverse honors program. Knowing that this is an unusual situation has made me extremely grateful for the chance that I have to work with such a wonderfully inclusive group of students. Through my graduate courses in educational leadership and policy studies, I have come to learn about the systemic and cultural barriers that many Students of Color face when attempting to navigate the labyrinth of education in the United States. I hope that I can help to be an advocate for students who require additional guidance and support.

Site Selection

The research site that I selected for studying the phenomenon of the lived experience of honors program Students of Color at a large urban research university is the honors program at SWU. SWU is a large urban research institution that is noteworthy as one of the most racially diverse public universities in the United States, making this an appropriate location to study diverse student populations (America's Most Diverse Colleges, n.d.). However, in addition to the overall university campus being racially diverse, the primary reason that I chose this site was
that, while most honors programs in the United States tend to be disproportionately White in terms of student enrollment (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.), the honors program at SWU stands as an exceptional case due to the racial diversity of the university campus and the racial diversity within the honors program. Due to the nature of this phenomenological study, having all of the participants at one site was appropriate, because the participants all had a shared lived experience due to attending the same honors program (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since all of the participants had this shared phenomenon, recruiting participants from one site was appropriate for the needs of this study.

An essential aspect of research site selection is access, or gaining the permission of individuals at the site to be researched (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this particular case, I discussed the possibility of research at the site in question even before I started my doctoral program with gatekeepers for the site, who provided their support for me to research with students at this particular institution. Having the support of gatekeepers was not sufficient; however, as during the process of the study, I needed to actively and carefully plan to gain permission from the Institutional Review Board to ensure that my research passed the requirements for ethical research involving living human research subjects (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the proposal for this study was approved, I gained approval from the IRB.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection**

Recruitment began after I received approval from the IRB. I then took several steps to recruit participants. (A) Requested that honors program staff administrators provide a list of the names and email addresses of members of the SWU honors program who had self-identified as Students of Color. (B) Sent emails to the SWU honors program Students of Color to invite them to participate in the study (Appendix A). (C) Hung posters in the SWU honors program lobby
and study lounge, as well as other frequently used buildings on the SWU campus, such as the student union (Appendix B). (D) Requested that the SWU honors program include information on the call for participants on their social media pages (Appendix B). (E) Recruited at honors program events with a pre-approved script (Appendix C).

These procedures were used until sufficient participants had expressed interest in assisting with the study. Phenomenological researchers may have a participant pool ranging from less than 10 in some cases to more than 300 in others, depending upon the needs of the study (Polkinghorne, 1989). This particular study included 12 participants, and I conducted interviews using a semi-structured format (Appendix D) until there was a saturation of information (Charmaz, 2014). This means that the information in interviews started to become repetitive. All participants signed a voluntary consent form before participating (Appendix E).

Criterion sampling was used for this study to maintain consistency between participants’ experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The requirements for participation in this study were at least 18 years old, enrollment in the SWU honors program for at least one semester, and self-identification as a Person of Color. The age requirement was so that all participants were legal adults who did not need parental permission to be involved in the study. By selecting participants for the study from students who had participated in the SWU honors program for at least one semester, I ensured that all of the participants were not newcomers to the experience, and thus gave responses that drew upon their experience with the honors program. The requirement of self-identifying as a Student of Color limited the participant pool to students who had lived experience being an honors Student of Color.

Further, a phenomenological approach requires the participants to have experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since all of the participants had lived
experience of the phenomenon, this study fits this ideal for a phenomenological study.

Additionally, I strived to have the final product include parity of participants with race, gender, etc. Since I had more participants than necessary interested, I put additional students on a waitlist.

Table 3.1
Summary of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Genevieve</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Bioengineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annabelle</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Computer Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Aerospace Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Junior</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Junior</td>
<td>Biochemistry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerry</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

I used three main methods for data collection: (a) semi-structured interviews with participants, (b) observations of participants, and (c) analytic memo writing during the research
The primary data sources were semi-structured interviews with participants who met the specified participation criteria and consented to be voluntary participants in the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All information was stored in a secure location on a computer encrypted with password-protection to protect the privacy of participant information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As an additional security measure to maintain the confidentiality of the participants, I de-identified all data, and I will give all the participants pseudonyms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participant was requested to participate in at least one interview. I interviewed each participant via streaming video chat. Each interview lasted approximately up to an hour, with the same questions for all participants coming from my interview protocol (Appendix A), and discussed the experiences of participants and their perceptions of diversity and sense of belonging. All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and de-identified.

Interviews are not the only method of data collection that may be employed by qualitative researchers, and sometimes, actions do speak louder than words as the saying goes, and so it can be helpful to have observations of participants as well to gauge the reactions and body language of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I conducted observations during the semi-structured interviews. While I recorded the participant’s words, I also paid attention to body language and vocal inflections. Since I was observing the participants, conducting the interviews via streaming video was important, as opposed to merely a phone or email conversation. Paying attention to how my participants acted, as well as to how they spoke, was valuable in gaining a complete picture of their experience.

The third method that I used was analytic memo-writing throughout the research process. I followed the ideas of Charmaz (2014) in terms of keeping a record during the process as a way of processing my thoughts. Since my research philosophy matches van Manen (2016) more than
Moustakas (1994), acknowledging my own experiences and embracing my interpretations as part of the process was appropriate. By also including some of the suggestions of Charmaz (2014) as part of this process, writing detailed memos throughout the process allowed me to keep track of my interpretations as they occur in the process.

**Data Analysis**

After collecting data, the next step in the process for a researcher is to analyze the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It can be helpful to have multiple types of analysis, and I selected the following: (a) transcription of interviews (b) line-by-line coding (c) axial coding (d) selective coding, and (e) memo-writing (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the data analysis process, all information was stored in a secure location to protect the privacy of participant information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Information was kept on a password-protected computer (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I also de-identified participant information in the data for an additional security measure (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since participation was voluntary, and participants provided valuable help to my research, it was essential to respect their contributions and protect their privacy (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I sent the audio files to a transcription service as soon as possible after each interview in order to have a transcript to review as quickly as possible. To ensure clarity and accuracy, I then checked each transcription against the recording and corrected any errors that were made by the transcription service. I continued the process of note-taking by also listening to the recordings again to see if there was anything that I did not catch the first time, or if I had a different interpretation (Charmaz, 2014). If I had any questions after I had the transcript back, I reached out to the participant to follow-up for clarification.
After I was satisfied with the accuracy of each transcription, I then moved into the process of line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2014). Quite literally, this was the process of searching each line of the transcription for the actions and meaning in participants’ stories and assigning them to categories (Charmaz, 2014). With the initial participants, in particular, doing this after each interview was transcribed was helpful not only in finding out what the participants said but also what they did not say (Charmaz, 2014). According to Charmaz (2014), this type of coding helps researchers to interpret the data in interviews (Charmaz, 2014).

Following the initial line-by-line coding, I then moved into the more sophisticated step of axial coding. The initial codes were used to find relationships among the different pieces of data (Charmaz, 2014). This proved particularly important, as I was interviewing multiple people who had different perspectives. The use of axial coding helped build a cohesive storyline that combined the individual participants’ stories into the overarching phenomenological narrative.

The next step was using selective coding to create themes as they emerged. Selective coding is a way for a researcher to categorize information related to similar ideas, phrases, experiences, etc. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the process of analyzing data, themes emerged from the transcripts of the interviews as it became apparent what feelings and occurrences were common to multiple persons (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As I interviewed numerous participants, the themes shifted somewhat as a more precise picture emerged (Charmaz, 2014). All of this converged in the final product describing a phenomenon based on multiple students, serving as a representation of the lived experiences of the students who shared the experience of being a Student of Color in a racially diverse honors program.

The final step in my data analysis process was writing memos. There are many different forms of data analysis, and one of these is the process of writing memos (Saldana, Leavy, &
Written memos served as the focal point for where I placed down my thoughts on the process, reflecting on the different ideas and experiences that have shared underlying meaning for research study participants. I wrote memos through both the data collection and data analysis stages (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process enabled me to document my thoughts both before and after speaking with participants and was a way for me to process my interpretation of the meaning behind the data that I collected. In addition, by meticulously writing memos, it was easier for me to note any outliers.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is an integral part of a qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure trustworthiness in my final report, I used three different methods recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018): rich and thick description, member checking, and peer debriefing. The concept of rich, thick description involved giving higher levels of details and information concerning the interview of participants than is usually seen in other types of qualitative research. With member checking, all participants were given the opportunity to review both the transcriptions of their interviews as well were offered the chance to read the final paper. I also used peer debriefing by having my findings section read by colleagues who were able to challenge any issues they saw with my interpretation of information to ensure that my findings were trustworthy.

**Limitations**

This study provided a detailed look at the lived experiences of honors Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program. However, there were some limitations. First, as a White female researcher, my interpretations of the lived experiences of the participants may have differed from their interpretations. Second, this study was only designed to study the lived
experiences of students who had persisted in a racially diverse honors program, and thus, excluded students who did not persist. Third, due to my status as a staff member in an honors program, participants might have been less than forthcoming with responses to me than they would to someone who has no affiliation with honors education.

**Summary**

Chapter Three included a proposed research design, approaches to data collection, data analysis, and limitations of the study. Previous research on honors Students of Color has been limited, and there is a gap concerning the experiences of honors Students of Color in a diverse university environment (Klos, 2018; Reddick et al., 2017; Scott, 2017). This study fills that void by examining the lived experiences of Students of Color who were currently enrolled in a diverse honors program and provided an illustration of these experiences.

Previously, Chapter One provided an overview of honors programs and stated the problem and the reasons for the importance of studying experiences of honors students from the perspective of successful Students of Color in these institutions. Chapter Two synthesized literature related to the experiences of high-achieving Students of Color in post-secondary education settings in the United States and explored the theoretical framework of sense of belonging that I will use as the foundation for this study. Chapter Four will include detailed introductions of the participants, well as thematic descriptions of the findings of the study. Chapter Five will include a discussion of the findings, limitations, and suggestions for future research.
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to use hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to explore the lived experiences (van Manen, 2016) and perceptions of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) of honors Students of Color at a large, urban research university. Since there is a gap in the literature concerning success narratives for Students of Color in diverse honors programs, it was important to develop an understanding of this phenomenon. The following research questions were used to explore this issue:

1. How do Students of Color enrolled in honors programs describe their experiences?
2. What helps foster a sense of belonging among the Students of Color enrolled in honors programs?
3. What hinders a sense of belonging among Students of Color enrolled in honors programs?

In this chapter of the study, I introduce the participants, discuss the meaning of sense of belonging, and review the data analysis. The chapter is divided into five main sections, one section introducing the participants, the second, third, and fourth sections explore the themes that emerged fitting with each of the research questions. I conclude with a summary of the chapter. Chapter Five includes an analysis of the key themes and will connect the key findings to the literature review.

The Participants

Participants were purposefully selected from the 76 respondents to recruitment efforts for the study. Finalists were chosen based upon the length of time in the honors program at SWU. Additional selection criteria were based upon race and gender, so as to give a balanced and broad spectrum of diverse perspectives. All of the participants self-identified as Students of Color.
There were 12 interviewees, six male and six female, and there was a racial balance as well with four Asian students, four Black students, and four Latinx students. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms were used in this paper. All participants were asked to select their pseudonym instead of having one assigned by the researcher. The rationale for this was two-fold: first, so that the participants could have another level of involvement, and second, to remove any potential racial bias from having the interviewer choose the name. As a researcher, I was intrigued that all of the participants steered toward names that were racially ambiguous, even if the participant had a name that is closely associated with a particular ethnicity.

As part of profiling the participants, there were five main areas discussed: the gender, racial identity, academic classification (grade), major, and the number of semesters that the participant was in the honors program. These categories give a brief illustration of the participants, who will also be introduced as more in-depth as individuals. In order to be in the honors program at SWU, participants need to have a minimum 3.35 GPA if they entered the program after their first semester in college. If participants entered as a freshman prior to having a college GPA, participants needed to have Combined Evidence-Based Reading/Writing and Math SAT score of 1270, or ACT score of 27, or graduated in the upper 10 percent of their high school class.

**Genevieve**

Genevieve was a Latinx female. She was also a senior and was a business major. Before coming to SWU in 2016, Genevieve “did not think [she] was going to like it, but [she] really found [her] home at SWU after joining several organizations and clubs, and a lot of that had to do with joining the honors program during the spring of 2017.” These clubs included a service organization and a foreign language club. Genevieve had also been involved in the honors
program for five semesters so far. While being an honors student was not in Genevieve’s initial plans, she decided to give it a try because she “was bored...in classes, literally just sitting there, zoning out...and coming from an experience in high school...constantly pushed, and constantly taking difficult classes...wanted something closer to that kind of rigor and style.”

Amelia

Amelia was a Latinx female. In addition, she was a senior and a bioengineering major. Amelia was also involved on campus at SWU in other areas, such as the leadership development program run by the Student Affairs office and the Biomedical Engineering Society. So far, Amelia had been in the honors program for six semesters. In deciding to become an honors student she “considered the rigor within the honors program...additionally, the smaller classes were a big factor as well...it's really nice having...a more personal relationship with the professor, and...it's really nice to have similar, like-minded people within the program, who also have big dreams and want to accomplish a lot.”

Israel

Israel was a Latinx male. In addition, he was a senior and a biology major. Israel was involved in a leadership organization on campus, as well as pre-medical organizations and competitions. Israel had been involved in the honors program for four semesters so far. Being an honors student had helped Israel “to become a better student... because it does have those requirements in order to stay in the college.” In addition to improving academically, Israel also credited the honors program at SWU with helping him to build socialization skills as well, “relat[ing] to others and it's just fun having those experiences.”
Charles

Charles was a Black male. In addition, he was a senior and a biology major. He had been involved on campus in residence life, the campus programming board, and was a member of a fraternity. Charles had been involved in the honors program for six semesters. Describing himself as “nerdy,” Charles said that when contemplating joining the honors program he considered the benefits that he “would gain from it,” and also considered how it would “line up with...career goals...to pursue neuroscience in a research capacity.” Additionally, Charles said that designation as an honors student on his resume could prove useful for graduate school, as would completing a research paper for his capstone senior project for the honors program at SWU.

Annabelle

Annabelle was an Asian female. In addition, she was a junior and a biology major. Annabelle was a resident assistant and is involved in a pre-medical society for Students of Color. So far, Annabelle had been involved in the honors program for three semesters. Other students, who were her “really close friends,” encouraged Annabelle to join the honors program.” Annabelle described herself as “overwhelmed” during her first semester of college, but then became more active on campus during her second semester, including joining the honors program. Academic excellence had always been important to Annabelle, who noted that she was “raised around the idea of making sure that academics were really important.”

Jane

Jane was an Asian female. In addition, she was a senior and a computer engineering major. Jane’s co-curricular activities included a volunteering club and the campus programming board. She had been in the honors program for six semesters. Being an international student, Jane
“didn’t know what to expect. It’s a different culture and background.” However, Jane then “met really helpful people who helped guide...to the right path...and tried to get immersed in college life.” The decision to join the honors program came after Jane “read up on it...really liked the idea of putting a bit of extra effort to learn more...and making a thesis and bringing something new to the field.”

**Tony**

Tony was a Latinx male. In addition, he was a junior and an aerospace engineering major. Tony’s campus involvement had been mainly focused on the engineering department, and he planned to become more actively involved in engineering clubs. He had been involved in the honors program for three semesters. He decided to join the honors program because “it looks good on a resume...But also to meet people who are willing...to make sacrifices.” In addition, Tony said that “honors education gives the chance to maximize … abilities, a way to...go the extra mile...a place where you can learn and grow as a person.” According to Tony, while being an honors student may have involved more effort and was “challenging because you have always to do some extra work. There’s always something you have to do so you can be in better shape...but in the end, it pays off.”

**Ryan**

Ryan was an Asian male. In addition, he was a junior and a computer science major. Ryan was a member of a fraternity and attended campus athletic events. He had been involved in the honors program for three semesters. Ryan was an international student and said that he decided to join the honors program because he “wanted to be challenged a bit more academically and...also wanted to get that honors degree” to “differentiate...from most people.” Additionally,
Ryan said that he was “willing to put in the work...to earn that title...also honors...does offer a lot of benefits, scholarships, and everything.”

Karen

Karen was a Black female. In addition, she was a junior and a biochemistry major. While working in two campus laboratories assisting professors with research, Karen was also involved in clubs for science majors. Karen had been involved in the honors program for four semesters. She decided to join the honors program because as a high school student, she was eligible to join honor societies, but had held herself back. For Karen, coming to college was “a clean start” that allowed her to “let loose and strive for success despite being clouded with immense self-doubt and imposter syndrome.” She described honors education as “a provocative curriculum that doesn’t just skim the surface, but truly delves into the subject matter and brings forth new perspectives and ideas.”

Mariah

Mariah was a Black female. In addition, she was a sophomore and a nursing major. Initially, she had not been active on campus during her first semester, “but...decided to get more involved in the university. The second semester...ended up really liking SWU because there were a lot of groups to join in. It’s really inclusive.” At the time of the interview, Mariah was involved in the campus programming board and fitness classes at the university gym. Mariah had been involved in the honors program for two semesters. Prioritizing the honors program in her schedule was part of her getting more involved and was “another opportunity to meet new people, and also it would look good on a resume.” For Mariah, being an honors student was also “a way of getting more out of your classes. So, you just take an honors course which...allows you to get more into the topic.”
Andrew

Andrew was an Asian male. In addition, he was a senior and a business major. He had been involved on campus as a resident assistant, an orientation leader, and was a member of pre-professional clubs for business majors. Andrew had been involved in the honors program for five semesters. He was also an international student. Wanting to “get involved in college, and to have some more achievements” were some of the reasons that Andrew decided to join the honors program. Additionally, Andrew “looked at the program, and the first and biggest thing was...smaller classes as compared to some of the biggest classes of 150 students...smaller classes of 25.”

Jerry

Jerry was a Black male. In addition, he was a sophomore and a mathematics major. He had been involved in a leadership program, the campus programming board, and worked on campus. Jerry had been involved in the honors program for two semesters. He decided to join the honors program for “scholarship money...ways to get known on campus, it’s a great thing to have on your resume. So, it just seemed like a good opportunity.” Jerry described honors education as an “extra challenge...You’ve got to keep your grades up, that’s just a given...you get to do things that you normally wouldn’t get to do in an academic setting.”

Overall, this group of participants with a variety of backgrounds and experiences shared the common phenomenon of being a Student of Color in a racially diverse program. There was a resounding thematic consensus on all of the themes but one, which will be discussed in the key findings. In the ensuing sections, I explore the following themes: academic challenge and prestige, community and friendship, desired improvements to the experience, and racial diversity.
Thematic Analysis

Academic Challenge and Prestige

The first research question for this study examined the descriptions that Students of Color have regarding their experience in a racially diverse honors program. There was a unanimous consensus from all of the participants that their experience of honors education involved both internal academic challenges for themselves, as well as receiving external prestige for their efforts. In this section, I discuss the description the participants had of both internal and external factors in honors education.

**Rigor.** There was a consensus among the 12 participants relating to an internal drive to learn more in-depth and have a more rigorous experience than the typical curriculum allowed at SWU. Participants described seeking out a more challenging experience as part of the reason that they chose to join the honors program at SWU. Due to the nature of the program, students have to apply to join, as admission is not automatic even for students meeting the eligibility criteria.

While some students joined before the start of their first semester, others joined later in their college career after experiencing the typical curriculum. Genevieve joined the honors program after her first semester at SWU because she felt that she “needed a bigger challenge than the SWU curriculum,” after experiencing boredom due to the ease of her coursework load for her. Andrew joined for similar reasons, and noted that he also appreciated that honors sections of courses are smaller than average class sizes at SWU, which allows students to have opportunities to “connect more with the professor.” Amelia said that she “loves to push” her boundaries and “strives for success,” and that was why she wanted to join the honors program. Jerry stated that he was motivated to join to have “that extra challenge” as well as to “do things
that you normally wouldn’t get to do in an academic setting. Tony described the internal motivation of challenge as a form of personal growth. He explained:

*All of honors education has the chance to maximize your abilities, a way to put some extra kind of weight to yourself, so you can do the most you can. To go the extra mile, kind of. So, it is a place where you can learn and grow as a person. It is challenging because you have to always do some extra work. There is always something you have to do so you can be in better shape from normal people, like extra work. I would say just extra work, but in the end, it pays off.* (Tony)

To summarize, Tony’s words encapsulate the consensus of the group in regards to the internal motivation of academic challenge. For these participants, settling for doing well in the standard curriculum was not fulfilling enough, and these students elected to take on work, not because they needed to, but because they wanted to learn more than they otherwise would have. For all of the participants, the academic challenge was an internal motivator sufficient to drive them to do further requirements to earn an honors degree.

**Recognition.** There was a consensus among the 12 participants relating to an external drive to be recognized for their extra work and gain new opportunities that they would not otherwise have, particularly with an eye towards future employment opportunities and admission to graduate degree programs. Participants described the benefits of having proven their academic prowess through taking on additional challenges beyond what they would have needed to do for their degree as ways to distinguish themselves from other students and have better-quality references and letters of recommendation.

Being an honors student is a way for students to have opportunities for undergraduate research and more in-depth discussion with professors on the course material, as well as chances
to earn additional scholarships. Ryan discussed the additional work as being worthwhile as “[i]t would set me apart. I was willing to put in the work to earn that title. And also, the honors program does offer a lot of benefits, scholarships, and everything, so I wanted all of it all together.” Jane had similar motivations, noting that “[i]t helps you to learn more. Not only more about your career, but if you have future plans in graduate school, it really helps you.” Mariah also noted the opportunities for networking, as well as resume building. Charles described the external motivation of prestige as part of the long-term benefits of additional short-term work. He explained:

*I definitely mainly just [considered] what benefits would I gain from it, and did it line up with my career goals. So, my career goal, since my junior year of high school, has always been to pursue neuroscience in a research capacity. And then basically the main thing was, well, that would probably help me a lot for grad school in terms of one, just being able to put that on my resume or my CV, and two, the requirement for having a research paper due. So that aligns with my interests pretty well.* (Charles)

To summarize, Charles’ comments illustrate the overall consensus of the group in regard to the external motivation of prestige. For these participants, the short-term sacrifices of doing more than they needed to as undergraduates were worth it for the plethora of long-term benefits that they could potentially gain in the future. For all of the participants, prestige was an external motivator sufficient to drive them to do the additional requirements to earn an honors degree. Being a student in an honors program involves aspects that are not entirely focused on academic prowess, however. For some students, the non-academic aspect of being in an honors program is just as important as the academic side, perhaps even more so for some. One non-academic aspect
is building friendship and community, something that may make students feel more like they belong to a group.

**Community and Friendship**

The second and third research questions for this study examined what fosters a sense of belonging and what hinders the sense of belonging for Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program. There was a consensus from the participants that they felt a sense of belonging and camaraderie as a result of having joined the honors program. In addition, there was a general agreement on the honors program having provided the opportunity to form friendships with likeminded individuals, and to discuss struggles and triumphs within their educational journeys.

**Belonging.** There was general agreement among the 12 participants regarding a shared experience of a feeling of belonging and connection thanks to joining the honors program. Participants illustrated their experiences regarding students and staff members in the honors program, providing opportunities to connect with others, as well as organic connections forming due to being in proximity with other like-minded students.

For some of the participants, being in the honors program is more than a way of earning academic recognition; it is a way of building a safe space on campus. Mariah chatted about finding belonging through the honors program due to it being “a nice way to have a community with people that are on campus.” Genevieve discussed the idea of finding a home in the honors program, noting that “the community” in the honors program provides “a really good environment.” Due to the rigorous atmosphere, this means that the honors program provides a place for high-achieving students to gather. Israel noted that “you meet new people, and that's the good thing about it because those people share the same thoughts as you. They aspire to be better than the rest of the crowd.” Amelia agreed, noting that “it's nice to have likeminded people.”
Karen also talked about how meeting other honors students in the community was motivating for her allowing her to “[meet] new people” and become “a better person through the...experience.”

Ryan described the motivation of other students in the honors program as part of what helped to build a sense of community. He explained:

*I see that someone who is in the honors program has a better plan to some extent in some things. This is how I think that the honors program made me feel like I belong more in the community. They just show that they care more about my future and everything, and my academics.* (Ryan)

To summarize, Ryan’s remarks demonstrate the general agreement of the participants concerning the feeling of belonging that the participants had after becoming involved in the honors program. Among the interviewees, the chance to find other individuals who are highly motivated in terms of academics and, in turn, bolstered their motivation to do well in school. The honors program gave the participants of the study a way to find and belong to a community of individuals that might not otherwise have been possible.

Community for the participants included more than just finding other people who are also academically motivated. Further, it also provided the opportunity for participants to find people that they could connect with on a social level as well, leading to many of the participants to feel a greater sense of belonging as part of their lived experience in the honors program.

**Friendship.** Overall, the consensus amongst the 12 participants concerning their shared phenomenon was that being in a racially diverse honors program provided opportunities for building friendships with other students in the honors program. The interviewees discussed the friendships that they formed with other students in the honors program, as well as what these friendships meant to them.
While honors education may be primarily academic, the aspect of finding friendships with other honors students was also important to the participants of this study. Mariah discussed making friends during her very first day as an honors student “at orientation.” Annabelle has also made friends in honors, saying that she loves her “honors friends to death. They’re wonderful.” Jane also spoke about developing relationships through the honors program, saying that she “made a lot of new friends.” Due to the rigorous atmosphere, this means that the honors program provides a place for high-achieving students to gather. Andrew appreciated the opportunity to meet other students who were doing well in the school outside of his major, which allows honors students “to have a lot more friends.” Jerry came to similar conclusions, and said that being in the honors program is “a great way to spark conversation and just meet friends outside of just regular students.” Tony had similar thoughts, noting that there are “always activities...times where you can just go talk with people and meet new people and just hang out.” Beyond merely hanging out, participants also talked about forming solidarity with other honors students concerning their struggles and stresses. Karen discussed this, “hearing my friends in the honors college, saying that they're struggling too, and just knowing that it's not just me, I guess.” Knowing that they are not alone in their experiences is a way that some of the participants felt a sense of belonging. Charles’ remarks were similar to Karen’s, and he spoke at length about finding comfort in similar experiences with other participants. Charles explained:

So, a lot of times with my friends in the [honors program], when we were talking, it will be more like a therapy session than a conversation, of just...not complaints, but just offloading how much we have to do or how stressed we are to each other. I would say that's definitely the biggest good experience that's resulted from my involvement in the [honors program], the ability to hit someone up when I'm stressed about something, and
for them to truly understand because they're stressed in the same manner, just maybe over something slightly different. (Charles)

Overall, the remarks from Charles show the consensus among the participants about the importance of transparency and vulnerability in building a sense of belonging, community, and friendships between members of the honors program. By bringing together highly motivated students, not only can honors program students challenge each other, but they also support each other as they learn that they are not alone in their collegiate journey. Even though there were many things that the participants appreciated about their shared lived experience of being in a racially diverse program, all of the participants did have suggestions for how the honors program could be improved. While there were a variety of ideas offered up by the participants, the main theme from all of them was looking for improvements that would increase the amount of community and sense of belonging among the students in the honors program.

Suggestions for Improvement

The second and third research questions for this study examined what fosters a sense of belonging and what hinders a sense of belonging for Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program. Throughout interviews with participants, the overall emergent theme based on shared lived experience in terms of improvement was a request for additional ways to connect with other honors program students both inside and outside of the classroom setting. The changes requested were not major overhauls, but more of an expansion to what is already currently being offered by the honors program at SWU. Four participants had academic concerns, seven had social concerns, and one had no suggestions for improvement.

Academic. The main concerns for change from four out of the 12 participants were improvements to the academic side of the honors program. Participants described changes both
within the curriculum and availability of honors classes, as well as on the staffing and advising side. Additional requests had to do with more recruiting and marketing of the honors program.

While the honors program offers some honors sections of classes, there are still many more classes at SWU that are not available in honors sections. Amelia put in a request for “more honors courses.” Andrew had a similar request, although he specifically would like those sections to be taught by the best faculty on campus, noting that at SWU, “some of the professors have had wonderful achievements. They are the ones who should be teaching the honors sections.” Mariah’s ideal improvement would be to add the ability to have “more meetings with staff.” Jane’s concerns were more related to recruiting and marketing. She stated:

I guess recruiting and making their policies a bit easier to understand, because with prospective honor students ... I've been talking to my friends. They're just really scared about joining it because they think it's a huge workload and they wouldn't be able to do it, and it's really hard. And basically, if you're taking honors, it's like an entirely different major. That's not the case. So, I guess making the policies and the process of becoming an honor student a bit more clear. (Jane)

For these four participants, when thinking of improvements for the honors program at SWU, the first thing that came to mind for them was improvements to the academic portions of being in the honors program. The lived experience for this subset of students may thus be more focused on the structure and policies surrounding the process of being an honors student in a racially diverse honors program. For the other participants, however, the academic portion was not the first improvement to come to mind, as social changes were more predominant for seven of the participants.
Social. The main concerns for change from seven out of the 12 participants were improvements to the academic side of the honors program. Participants described changes to the number and timing, as well as marketing and promotion, of activities available for honors program students. Additional requests had to do with more space and amenities within the honors program building itself.

Some of the participants would like to see an increase in promotional marketing for the honors program activities. Tony requested more “communication with these activities. Not just emails. Posting more on social media, maybe.” Jerry agreed, and wanted more opportunities to interact in person, noting that students, “get the emails, but they really wouldn't stick as well as really just having just a chance to really get to know people more often than just seeing them on a day-to-day basis.” Charles expressed a desire for more face-to-face time with others in the honors program, and specifically would like to have a system put in place for students to meet others with similar majors, with the honors program facilitation.” Annabelle also talked about increasing activity in the honors program by “getting more honors students involved and building relationships.”

In addition to bolstering relationships, other requests were for improvements to amenities. Genevieve had a specific request, “we should get a microwave... [also] having the [honors study lounge] open [later] would be really nice... [and] the small space. We're constantly growing. We need a bigger space.” Karen also wanted more time in the honors lounge as well as additional activities, “I love...before finals, [the] food galore, and stress-free activities... [and] I feel like the [honors lounge] should also be open more.” Ryan was also interested in more activities for honors program students. He stated:
In honors, I feel like there should be more activities that bring [honors program] students together. I haven't seen a lot of events where the whole honors community is called to one place just to have some kind of social gathering or any kind of a gathering. There were some programs where they brought a professor or a speaker where they were talking about their research and the whole [honors program] students were invited. I have been to a few of them, but over there you go, and you listen to a speaker talk about their research and things which are very interesting, but that doesn't really give the opportunity for students to connect with one another as much. You see, some people in the [honors study lounge], but you don't see all of them. You probably see five to six percent of the students. Something that would bring in a group bigger population of the honors in the program or an event something that's interesting, something that attracts people. Just give everyone an opportunity to bond with each other. (Ryan)

For these seven participants, when thinking of improvements for the honors program at SWU, the first thing that came to mind for them was improvements to the social portions of being in the honors program. The lived experience for this subset of students may thus be more focused on the relationships and interactions surrounding the lived experience of being an honors student in a racially diverse honors program. Due to all participants being Students of Color, however, all of the participants had opinions on how their racial backgrounds influenced their shared phenomenon of a lived experience as Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program.

Influence of Race on Experience

The second and third research questions for this study examined what fosters a sense of belonging and what hinders a sense of belonging for Students of Color in a racially diverse
honors program. There was a unanimous consensus from all of the participants concerning a positive lived experience due to the racially diverse nature of the SWU campus in general, and the racially diverse nature of the honors program in particular. However, there was an almost even split between the participants when discussing whether they felt added pressure due to their racial background. This split was the most intriguing finding of the entire study. It was noteworthy, as the division was (with one exception) almost entirely down gendered lines, with the majority of the female participants waxing in-depth on additional pressure they felt due to their racial identity, and all of the male participants finding it to be of minimal importance. While I, as a researcher, had expected that at least some of the participants would express feelings of pressure due to their racial backgrounds, this division of opinion being starkly based on gendered lines was a clearly stated difference of opinion among the group.

**Diversity.** The student body at the SWU campus is one of the most racially diverse in the entire United States (America's Most Diverse Colleges, n.d.), and the honors program at SWU is also highly racially diverse. Thus, the subtheme of positive racial diversity was expected, but still, a welcome chance to learn from the participants what they thought of the situation. This was a particularly important part of the study because, while there are other racially diverse college campuses (America's Most Diverse Colleges, n.d.), the number of racially diverse honors programs is much smaller (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.). By discussing the lived experiences of the participants of the study of the phenomenon of this shared experience, insights were gained.

Due to the overall diversity at SWU, the campus is well-known for this attribute, which some participants appreciated. Mariah noted that, due to SWU being “such a diverse campus,” she feels “more motivated” and “less of a minority than I would be at a different campus.”
Annabelle’s opinions were in consensus with Mariah, noting that “there’s not a significant difference in any kind of views or treatment.” Tony had similar views, explaining that in his experience, racial differences are “just always a conversation topic.” Jane had similar feelings, stating that she is involved, “in a lot of organizations…it’s actually pretty great. [SWU] doesn’t make me feel excluded.” Beyond inclusion, some participants felt that diversity at SWU is celebrated. Ryan had views on this, saying that “I am never made to feel bad about being different. It’s something that is always appreciated.” This was a sentiment shared among many participants. Israel captured this lived experience in his statement:

I would say that here at [SWU], you shouldn’t be afraid of who you are. Not just in a racial way, just in the way you identify just because the university is very accepting of diversity....we don't judge you based on your race. We'd rather judge you based upon your actions, and your personal character, just like Martin Luther King once said.

(Israel)

For these participants, the shared phenomenon of being honors Students of Color at a racially diverse university was an overwhelmingly positive experience, with support and inclusion in campus life and activities. Feeling not only welcomed but appreciated, helped these participants to feel a sense of belonging on the SWU campus, leaving positive memories of their lived experience. When mentioning diversity with other participants, however, the responses were more attuned to the diversity in the honors program itself, although all of the participants did appreciate the campus diversity at SWU. The participants’ responses to the diversity in the honors program were a particular point of interest due to the purpose of this study being focused on the lived experiences of Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program.
The honors program at SWU is exceptionally racially diverse in comparison to other honors programs, which is something that several of the participants mentioned during their interviews. Genevieve did point out that, while the honors program is fairly racially diverse, there are some populations, such as Latinx students, that could be represented better, but she said that overall, the honors program is “pretty diverse.” Karen concurred, and discussed the diversity at the honors program at SWU’s honors program in comparison to other honors programs, saying, “I know that at other schools and honors programs...it's kind of a rarity, not super rare, but there's very few, specifically Black Women of Color in those programs.” Charles had similar thoughts, saying that he takes “notice of how many other Students of Color there are in the honors program. It does seem to me that our honors program is fairly diverse, which makes sense because it's a representative of the student body at [SWU].” Andrew concurred, and said that one of the things that he enjoys about being involved in the honors program is meeting “people from different races.” Amelia also enjoys the diversity within the honors program and said that a highlight is the chance to “interact with just different types of people within the program, and I think I've learned a lot out of people who are of Color. I think I also have given my perspective as a Latina within the honors community...I get to educate and learn.” Overall, the consensus was that, while some populations could be better represented, overall, the diversity with the honors program was appreciated by participants. Jerry gave voice to this opinion:

*I guess for me; the biggest thing is just how little emphasis honors puts on my color. I haven't had this experience where I've been like, 'Man, I'm a Student of Color in [the honors program].' That's not really something that's really been affected to me; I'm just another [honors program] student that also wants to be successful at that. They've really made a point to where we're all [honors program] students. We're not a Black student or*
a White student or a Hispanic student. We're just [honors program] students who want to
graduate and be successful. And I really think they did a great job of that, so I want to
say thanks for that. (Jerry)

While there is room for improvement in terms of getting the honors population percentages
closer to the SWU populations, overall, the honors program is a racially diverse environment,
and the participants enjoyed the shared phenomenon of being Students of Color in a racially
diverse honors program. Moreover, the participants themselves were the ones who brought up
how racially diverse the honors program is in comparison to other honors programs in the United
States, and it was a point of pride and appreciation for many of them. However, the experience of
being a Student of Color was not entirely positive, as some of the participants felt that they had
additional pressure placed upon them due to their racial background.

**Pressure Due to Race and Gender.** This subtheme had the most surprises and the least
amount of consensus out of any of the themes that emerged throughout this study. While the
concept of feeling pressure due to racial backgrounds was not a surprise due to the literature
review in Chapter Two, what was intriguing was the sharp division between the responses of the
male and female participants. This subtheme and the interesting results will be discussed at
length in Chapter Five. Out of the 12 participants, seven did not feel unduly burdened by their
racial background. This group encompassed all six of the male participants, as well as one of the
female students (Jane, who was also an international student).

In Jane’s viewpoint, being a Student of Color was a beneficial part of her lived
experience, noting that being different allowed her to share “new perspectives” with others. Ryan
was ambivalent and did not think being a Student of Color made a difference for him, saying, “I
don't think it has made any difference. I don't think I'm treated differently. I don't think I get any
benefits [nor advantages]. I don't think it has affected me in any way.” Tony shared a similar sentiment and stated that “I think I would say it has not made a big effect.” Andrew did not think his racial background had any negative bearing on his experience, and noted that one of the things that he likes about being in the honors program is the racial diversity, saying that he has “met people from different races and different culture, and it was easy for me to go to somebody and just start a conversation, or just to make friends. And that was an important part.” Charles not only thought that his experience was not hindered by his racial background but enhanced. In addition to being in the honors program, Charles is also involved in a research program geared toward student populations that are underrepresented in higher education. As a result, Charles said that his “race has definitely helped me to be able to take advantage of this great program that's offered to me as an African American student.” Israel also said that his racial identity is a positive motivator for him, being motivated because his parents “came from Mexico. They migrated here. They came here with the mentality of striving for the best for their family... my racial identity has helped me in a way to strive for the best.” Jerry had similar thoughts in regards to his racial identity, and spoke an opinion that captured much of the group sentiment, saying:

Growing up, I've always learned not to let my color be a hindrance, but let it be an advantage. Use that to, since I'm different, stand out. And so for me, being a Man of Color in [the honors program] has been another way for me to stand out. Not only am I an African-American minority, but I'm also an African-American minority in [the honors program], in good academic standing, with good jobs, and things of that nature. (Jerry)

By and large, the commentary from Jerry is representative of the consensus of the male participants regarding their shared lived experience of being a Student of Color in a racially diverse honors program. For the male participants, at least, the phenomenon of being a Student
of Color and a member of the honors program does not carry too much additional pressure due to their racial background.

For the vast majority of the female participants, however, pressure due to racial identity was an important, but troubling aspect of their identity. While none of the female participants expressed concerns about external discrimination, both in general at SWU and more specifically within the honors program, five out of the six female concerns did discuss more internalized pressure due to their racial identity. This pressure could come from their family and cultural background, themselves, or a combination.

In all of these cases, however, the lived experience for these women of color in a racially diverse honors program was different than that of the male participants in the study. Mariah noted that the pressure she feels due to her racial background motivates her “to work harder to prove that I’m not the stereotype.” Karen also felt the same way saying that, as a “Black Woman in STEM, ...you always have to be perfect...my parents always told me that you have to do 10 times better than everyone else because some people are just waiting for you to...fail.” Although they have different racial backgrounds, Amelia felt the same way, saying, “people don't expect the things that I have accomplished out of me because I am Latina ...I am constantly trying to prove to other people that yes, I can do this. I am very much capable of accomplishing great things.” Genevieve mentioned similar pressure, saying: “It feels like race is always on the back burner of my identities because sometimes people will even question, ‘Do you think you're hard-working because you have more to prove? Do you feel as though the things that you do and the choices you make are part of who you are?’” For the majority of the female participants, being a Student of Color is an additional pressure. Annabelle voiced this perspective for the group, stating:
Rather than being a Student of Color specifically, I think I think of all the weight that carries with it in terms of everything, [that] my family [has] personally done for me to be here, everything that they've been through, how education wasn't always easy for them, given to them as easily, and they had situations that were much more severe that they faced discrimination in. I'm carrying a weight in a way that I have to do my best. I have to be as high achieving as I can be, and make sure that none of those sacrifices are wasted. (Annabelle)

Overall, the commentary from Annabelle is representative of both the internal and external pressures that the vast majority of the female participants mentioned regarding their shared lived experience as female honors Students of Color. The differences between the male and female participant responses to this subtheme will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

Summary

Chapter Four included detailed introductions of the participants, as well as thematic descriptions of the findings of the study. Previously, Chapter One provided an overview of honors programs and stated the problem and the reasons for the importance of studying experiences of honors students from the perspective of successful Students of Color in these institutions. Chapter Two synthesized literature related to the experiences of high-achieving Students of Color in post-secondary education settings in the United States and explored the theoretical framework of sense of belonging that I used as the foundation for this study. Chapter Three included a proposed research design, approaches to data collection, data analysis, and limitations of the study. Previous research on honors Students of Color has been limited, and there is a gap concerning the experiences of honors Students of Color in a diverse university
environment (Klos, 2018; Reddick et al., 2017; Scott, 2017). Chapter Five will include a discussion of the findings, limitations, and suggestions for future research.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Students of Color enroll in institutions of higher education at disproportionately represented rates (Welton & Martinez, 2014), and this disparity is even starker in honors programs (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2017). Students of Color may be discouraged when considering joining an honors program if they would be one of only a few Students of Color (Scott, 2017). Students of Color who are underrepresented at their college campus may feel out of place and lack a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019), making it more difficult for them to be successful (Griffin, Cunningham, & George Mwangi, 2016). Without feeling like they have a reason to belong, these Students of Color are potentially going to have a more difficult time connecting and persisting in their collegiate experience.

Due to the disproportionate enrollment of Students of Color in honors programs (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2017), there is a gap in the research literature on the experiences of Students of Color who are successfully enrolled in honors programs in general. There is an even bigger gap concerning a success narrative for students enrolled in diverse honors programs (Reddick et al., 2017). Nevertheless, there are a few honors programs in the United States with sizable populations of Students of Color that have not been well-researched (Klos, 2018). Thus, there is a gap in the research literature concerning the lived experiences of Students of Color in a diverse honors program.

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience (van Manen, 2016) of Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program at a large urban research university in the Southwestern area of the United States. I used this study to explore the lived experiences (van Manen, 2016) and perspectives of Students of Color who have enrolled and persisted in the
racially diverse honors program at Southwestern University (SWU). To develop an understanding of this phenomenon, I used the following research questions to guide my study:

1. How do Students of Color enrolled in honors programs describe their experiences?
2. What helps foster a sense of belonging among the Students of Color enrolled in honors programs?
3. What hinders a sense of belonging among Students of Color enrolled in honors programs?

I identified these research questions with the purpose of providing information to honors program administrators who want to build a culture of inclusion and diversity. To answer these research questions, I conducted a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study in which I facilitated semi-structured interviews with Students of Color who were enrolled in the same racially diverse honors program.

**Summary of Key Findings**

Through the course of this study, I found four key themes: academic challenge and prestige, community and friendship, suggestions for improvement, and influence of race on experience. Academic challenge and prestige included external and internal factors that motivate Students of Color to enroll and persist in a racially diverse honors program. Community and friendship covered the desire of the participants to build meaningful connections with other like-minded students. Suggestions for improvement contained ideas that the participants expressed to improve the honors program at SWU, both academically and socially. The last theme, the influence of race on the experience, was the most important theme, as participants discussed their lived experience of the phenomenon of being a Student of Color in a racially diverse honors program. In addition to the influence of the diversity of the program on their experience,
participants also discussed the pressures that they said they faced as Students of Color. However, most importantly, discussions of this lived experience unearthed distinctly different responses along gendered lines. This was the most important finding of the study, and I will discuss this discovery more in-depth later in the chapter. Throughout all of the findings, the overall connecting theme was a desire for a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). The theoretical basis that I used for this study was the sense of belonging framework for college students, and it was a good fit overall (Strayhorn, 2019). I will scrutinize the strength of the connection between each finding and the theories on a case-by-case basis. Strayhorn’s (2019) theoretical model contains seven main components. Of these, four of the components had a clear connection to the findings in my study.

Table 5.1
Theory and Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense of Belonging Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#2 “fundamental motive (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 32)”</td>
<td>#1 Academic Challenge and Prestige</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 “mattering (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 36)</td>
<td>#2 Community and Friendship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7 “must be satisfied on a continual basis (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 39)</td>
<td>#3 Suggestions for Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5 “social identities intersect (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 37)”</td>
<td>#4 Influence of Race on Experience</td>
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Discussion of Findings

Academic Challenge & Prestige

In Chapter Four, one of the key themes was academic challenge and prestige. One of the subthemes of this was rigor. I discussed the concept of rigor, which I defined as an internal drive
to learn topics in a more in-depth manner and have a more robust educational experience than a typical collegiate curriculum. I shared the responses of participants, who described their lived experiences concerning desiring a deeper, more meaningful experience than other students receive.

The students who were in my study felt that giving additional effort was not only something that they were willing to do but also indicated that being an honors student played a role in personal fulfillment as well as academic growth. A desire for additional rigor was an internal incentive for the participants to fulfill more requirements than necessary for undergraduate students so that they could complete requirements to graduate from the honors program at SWU. This finding is not a surprise, and it fits in with research discussed in the literature review concerning the desire from honors students to have more depth in their undergraduate curriculum. One such example comes from a multi-site study of the academic benefits of honors programs. In the study results, the authors concluded that students in honors programs gain real and tangible academic benefits because of participation in an honors program (Seifert, Pascarella, Colangelo, & Assouline, 2007). Thus, the findings of this study agreed with prior research on this topic in regards to academic rigor and honors programs.

A subtheme category related to rigor was that of recognition. Where rigor was an internal motivator, recognition was an external motivator. In Chapter Four, I explained the concept of recognition and defined it as an external motivator to drive students to go above and beyond the typical undergraduate collegiate curriculum. I shared the responses of participants who described their lived experiences with being externally motivated to put in more effort than is necessary to receive a bachelor’s degree.
Participants in this study expressed the idea that the external motivator of recognition was important to them. For these honors students, the knowledge that putting in additional labor as an undergraduate would allow them to reap benefits in the future was sufficient to inspire them to meet the requirements to graduate with an honors degree from SWU. As with the desire for more rigor in their curriculum, this finding was in line with research that I discussed in the literature review in Chapter Two. This is illustrated by an article concerning funding and administration of honors programs, where the researchers noted that the use of honors program scholarships is a way to recruit high-achieving students (Campbell K. C., 2005). Thus, the participants in my study confirmed prior research concerning the use of external rewards to motivate honors program students. The findings related to this theme ties into the sense of belonging theory, as the second part of the framework, notes that desire for this can be a “motive, sufficient to drive human behavior” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 32). Therefore, this theme also connects to the theoretical framework.

Table 5.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Component #2 and Finding #1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging Theoretical Framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>#2 “fundamental motive (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 32)”</td>
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**Community and Friendship**

Another key theme that I found and discussed in Chapter Four was community and friendship. For the participants in the study, the ability to feel that they were in a safe community and mattered to others was important. One of the subthemes from this was belonging. I defined this as a feeling of belonging and connection. I shared the responses of participants that
described their lived experiences with wanting to connect with other honors students and staff members in the honors program.

The participants demonstrated a desire to belong to a community within the honors program at SWU. By being in the honors program, students have the chance to contribute to a community of others who are high-achieving and motivated as well, providing the chance to be in a supportive community. This finding was expected and fits in with research discussed in the literature review concerning the desire from honors students to feel like they are in a community and belong with others. In a qualitative study concerning the experiences of honors students, researchers touted the value of co-curricular activities and building social connections in their findings (Hebert & McBee, 2007). Thus, the participants in my study confirmed prior research concerning the utility of honors programs to build a community of support for high-achieving students and giving the opportunity for these students to develop strong friendships.

A related subtheme to the community was friendship. I defined this as a sense of camaraderie and trust. I presented the responses of participants who described their lived experiences with wanting to build and sustain friendships with other students in the honors program at SWU who were going through similar experiences and could thus understand what other honors students were going through.

The participants demonstrated a desire to have authentic relationships with other honors students and have the freedom to be transparent and vulnerable with both stresses and successes. Through their involvement in the honors program at SWU, the participants in the study were afforded the opportunity to meet others with similar interests, abilities, and motivations, and were given opportunities to form and cultivate relationships with others. This finding was anticipated and fits in with research discussed in the literature review concerning the desire for
honors students to form genuine friendships with others who are high achieving and highly motivated.

In a qualitative study concerning the experiences of honors students, researchers noted in their findings the importance of finding other highly intellectual peers for students in honors programs, as for some students, a college honors program is the first chance to be in a group of peers with a similar mindset (Hebert & McBee, 2007). Thus, the participants in my study confirmed prior research concerning the social importance of honors programs in fostering connections between high-achieving honors program students. The findings related to this theme tied into the sense of belonging theory, as the fourth part of the framework, notes that there is an intersection of “mattering” and a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Therefore, this theme also connects to the theoretical framework.

Table 5.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Component #4 and Finding #2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging Theoretical Framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>#4 “mattering (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 36)</td>
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Suggestions for Improvement

In my study, I looked at both what fosters a sense of belonging and what hinders a sense of belonging for Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program. During discussions of the lived experiences of the participants, one of the themes that emerged was suggestions for improvement. The improvements suggested by participants fell into two subcategories: academic improvements to the honors program and social improvements to the honors program. Out of the
12 participants in the study, four of the participants indicated that the improvements that they were most concerned with were academic.

The participants offered recommendations to improve the academic aspects of the honors program at SWU. For half of the program participants, their concerns for improvements were mainly procedural and dealt with making changes to the academic structure of the honors program. This finding is not a surprise and fits in with research discussed in the literature review concerning the academic benefits for college students who participate in honors programs. In a study concerning the experiences of students at multiple honors programs, researchers found academic and intellectual benefits for students in honors programs (Seifert, Pascarella, Colangelo, & Assouline, 2007). Thus, the participants in my study confirmed prior research concerning the academic benefits of involvement in honors programs for high-achieving students.

While some of the students expressed ideas for academic improvement, seven of the students primarily suggested improvements to the social nature of the honors program at SWU. In my study, I looked at both what fosters a sense of belonging and what hinders a sense of belonging for Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program. During discussions of the lived experiences of the participants, one of the themes that emerged was suggestions for improvement. The improvements suggested by participants fell into two subcategories, academic improvements to the honors program, and social improvements to the honors program.

The participants offered suggestions to improve the social aspects of the honors program at SWU. The suggestions from the other participants who wanted more social improvements were centered on ways to build camaraderie for the honors program community at SWU. This finding is not a surprise and fits in with research discussed in the literature review concerning the
academic benefits for college students who participate in honors programs. In a qualitative study concerning the experiences of honors students, researchers found that participants greatly appreciated both formal and informal opportunities to build social connections with other honors program students (Hebert & McBee, 2007). Thus, the participants in my study confirmed prior research regarding the social importance for high-achieving students of participation in an honors program. The findings related to this theme ties into the sense of belonging theory, as the seventh part of the framework, notes that “sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis (Strayhorn, 2019, p.39).” Therefore, this theme also connects to the theoretical framework.

Table 5.4
*Theoretical Component # 7 and Finding #3*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense of Belonging Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#7 “must be satisfied on a continual basis</td>
<td>#3 Suggestions for Improvement</td>
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<td>(Strayhorn, 2019, p. 39)</td>
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**Influence of Race on Experience**

In Chapter Four, one of the key themes was the influence of race on the honors program lived experience for Students of Color. One of the subthemes of this was diversity. I noted how the campus at SWU is an interesting case in general since it is one of the most racially diverse college campuses in the United States (America's Most Diverse Colleges, n.d.). Due to the nature of the campus, this fact is well known to students and is a contributing factor for some in choosing to attend. I shared the responses of participants that described their lived experiences with attending a racially diverse university that also contains a racially diverse honors program.
While the number of Students of Color at the honors program at SWU is not quite proportional to the campus diversity at SWU, overall, the environment is a racially diverse one. The participants in the study noted on their own how racially diverse the honors program at SWU is, especially in comparison to other honors programs, and appreciated having the opportunity to learn in that type of setting. This finding is not a surprise and fits in with research discussed in the literature review concerning the need for more racial diversity in honors programs. In a study concerning the experiences of Students of Color in a very White honors program, researchers pointed out not only the low numbers of Students of Color in honors programs in general, but also, the lack of research concerning the experiences of the Students of Color who are enrolled within honors programs (Reddick et al., 2017). Thus, my participants not only understood the unusual nature of the honors program at SWU due to its racial diversity, but they are also contributing to the field of knowledge concerning the lived experiences of Students of Color in honors programs.

While the students generally liked that the honors program at SWU is racially diverse, five out of the six female participants discussed pressures that they felt being Women of Color in higher education. The female participants noted pressure from various sources, including themselves, their family, their cultural background, or a combination of these things. However, none of the males expressed pressure in the same way that the females did. Overall, the vast majority of the female participants discussed additional pressures and desires to prove themselves. The one female who did not express thoughts on these lines is an international student, and thus has a different cultural background from the other females.

This finding included a clear contrast between the male and female participants and was thus the most important finding of the study. The idea of high-achieving Students of Color
feeling more pressure than White students was to be expected, based on prior research done on a study of Students of Color in a White honors program (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). While research on the lived experiences of female Students of Color in honors programs is limited, prior research that has been done on Black female honors Students of Color does indicate that, due to the intersectionality of their identities, these students face additional pressures that males do not (Davis, 2018). Thus, the participants in my study confirmed prior research regarding the challenges for female Students of Color in an honors program, as well as opened the door for further research on this issue. The findings related to this theme tie into the sense of belonging theory, as the fifth part of the framework, notes that sense of belonging is influenced by how “social identities intersect (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 37).” Therefore, this theme also connects to the theoretical framework.

Table 5.5
*Theoretical Component #5 and Finding #4*

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<th>Sense of Belonging Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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<td>#5 “social identities intersect (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 37).”</td>
<td>#4 Influence of Race on Experience</td>
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**Implications for Research**

Based on the findings for this study, the most salient implications for future research is to focus more on exploring gender differences in the lived experiences of these Students of Color. As this was a clear and distinct discovery in my study, explicitly structuring a study to look at the different experiences of honors Students of Color would be helpful. Research specifically concerning the lived experiences of female Students of Color would be an appropriate topic for
future study, mainly because there is currently very little published research available on this topic (Davis A. M., 2018).

I would recommend conducting studies on the experiences of female Students of Color in honors programs to learn more about this group of high-achieving college students. Female Students of Color may face additional pressures that male students do not, as they have to contend with intersectional issues related to race and gender, so delving into the lived experiences of these female Students of Color could prove to be both fascinating and beneficial to identifying ways to improve their experiences.

In addition to studies based on female Students of Color, implications for research from this study include a need to study the intersectionality of gendered differences in the experiences of honors students. It would be helpful also to have future research look at the lived experiences of female students, both White and of Color, to explore the influence of gender on the lived experience of being an honors student. Because the male Students of Color did not express the concerns about pressures that the female students did, more research is warranted to see what influences females to have different lived experiences than male students.

Implications for Practice

Administrators of honors programs should be aware of the need for increased racial diversity in honors programs, and actively find ways to combat this issue. Due to increased enrollment of Students of Color in universities during the last few decades (National Center for Education Statistics), the lag of enrollment of Students of Color in honors programs is concerning (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.). Once administrators are aware of the need, steps for action can be taken on college campuses to increase recruitment and support for
honors Students of Color. Ideas for this could include working with recruitment officers at universities, building mentoring programs, and providing programming and support specifically for Students of Color.

In addition, based on the lived experiences of the female participants in this study, implications for practice also include providing mentoring and support specifically for the female students in honors programs. Honors program administrators could join forces with Women and Gender Studies programs, for example, to provide courses and programming that specifically discuss the influence of the intersection of identities for female students, especially female Students of Color.

**Implications for Policy**

At a point in time where state funding for higher education has been reduced, pushing for additional funding for things that may be considered extra can be controversial (Campbell K. C., 2005). However, honors education can be beneficial not only for students but also for institutions of higher education as well, particularly public institutions that are working to keep high-achieving students from attending institutions in other states (Seifert, Pascarella, Colangelo, & Assouline, 2007). Implications of this study include the importance of continued and increased funding of honors education as part of the funding of higher education. Additionally, implications from this study include development of policies for more comprehensive testing for gifted and talented programs in K-12 education to expand availability of these programs to more Students of Color (Card & Giuliano, 2016), as well as increasing college-preparatory course offerings in more high schools with high percentages of Students of Color (Barnard-Brak, McGaha-Garnett, & Burley, 2011).
Limitations

This study, as with any research endeavor, had inherent limitations. Due to the nature of this project, one of these was the possibility of self-selection bias. As I was interested in looking at factors that help students feel a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019), I focused on recruiting participants who had persisted in a racially diverse honors program. However, this means that the voices and lived experiences of Students of Color who failed to persist in a racially diverse honors program were not represented in this study. Additionally, while I worked to be aware of my own bias and outsider status, I am a White female who graduated from a racially diverse honors program. Future research could be done by other researchers who are of Color, as well as by researchers who did not attend an honors program as an undergraduate.

Significance

This study was significant in three different meaningful ways. The first way that this study was significant was in its unique nature. Due to the lack of published research on the experiences of Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program, through this study, I was able to provide new insights. By sharing the stories and the lived experiences of the participants whom I interviewed, I was able to offer fresh perspectives on a phenomenon that has not been included in publication in any great amount.

Another way that this study has importance is through strengthening the connection between the lived experiences of Students of Color and the theory of sense of belonging for college students (Strayhorn, 2019). As university administrators push for greater levels of involvement and engagement to increase retention on college campuses, making sure that Students of Color are included in these efforts is important. Finding ways to help Students of Color find a sense of belonging at their university can help with their retention, and this study
showed the power that sense of belonging can have on the lived experiences of Students of Color in a racially diverse honors program.

Most importantly, through the course of interviewing the participants about their lived experience of being a Student of Color in a racially diverse honors program, I was able to discover a clear difference in the perceptions of their lived experiences on distinctly gendered lines. The female Students of Color identified feelings of greater pressure and scrutiny that none of the male participants expressed. While there were commonalities in the findings of all the other themes, the pressures faced by the female participants was a clear difference and was the most significant information found during the time that I conducted the research for this study.

Conclusions

There is a gap in the research literature regarding the experiences of Students of Color in racially diverse honors programs. This gap exists in spite of the fact that honors programs are growing at large rates (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.), and Students of Color are increasingly enrolling in institutions of higher education (Scott, 2017). To increase enrollment and retention in honors programs for Students of Color, helping these students to develop a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) may be an important factor in choosing to enroll and persist in an honors program. To meet these goals, it is important to know how current honors Students of Color describe their experiences in honors programs. It is also important to learn what may foster a sense of belonging, as well as what hinders a sense of belonging, for Students of Color in honors programs.
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Appendices
Appendix A

Recruitment Email

Greetings honors students!

My name is Rebekah Chojnacki, and I am a doctoral candidate at UT Arlington. I am conducting a qualitative study regarding the experiences of Students of Color in honors programs at four-year universities. The purpose of this study is to discuss the lived experiences of Students of Color in a diverse honors program. Participation in this study will provide you with an opportunity to participate in an original research project and give your opinion on honors education.

Therefore, I would like to invite you to participate in one interview session with me. I anticipate that the interview will take approximately 60 minutes, and it will take place on campus. I may contact you for a follow-up interview. I will use the information from this interview toward the completion of my dissertation, but I will keep the identities of all participants anonymous.

Please let me know as soon as possible if you would like to participate in my research study by responding to Rebekah.chojnacki@uta.edu.

Thank you!

Rebekah Chojnacki
Appendix B

Recruitment Flier/Social Media Post

BE PART OF AN EXCITING EDUCATION RESEARCH STUDY!

STUDENTS OF COLOR IN A RACIALLY DIVERSE HONORS PROGRAM

- Are you at least 18 years old?
- Are you an honors student?
- Do you self-identify as a Student of Color?*

If you responded YES to all of these criteria, you may be eligible to participate in a voluntary, anonymous, educational research study.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences of Students of Color in a diverse honors program.

*American Indian/Native American, Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latinx, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, or multiracial.

Please contact Rebekah Chojnacki at Rebekah.chojnacki@uta.edu for more information.
Appendix C

Recruitment Speech

Good Morning/Afternoon honors students!

My name is Rebekah Chojnacki, and I am a doctoral candidate at UT Arlington. I am conducting a qualitative study regarding the experiences of Students of Color in honors programs at four-year universities. The purpose of this study is to discuss the lived experiences of Students of Color in a diverse honors program.

If you are at least 18 years old, have been an honors student for at least one semester, and self-identify as a Student of Color, you meet the criteria for this study! If you are interested, please come see me to discuss your eligibility for this study. You can also email me at rebekah.chojnacki@uta.edu if you have any questions.
Appendix D

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about yourself and your university experiences so far.

2. What did you consider when you were deciding to enter the honors program?

3. How would you describe honors education to someone who does not know about it?
   a. Probe – Tell me about the academic aspects of being an honors student.
   b. Probe – Tell me about the non-academic aspects of being an honors student.

4. Tell me about experiences that have helped you feel like you belong in the honors program, as well as any experiences that made you feel like you did not belong in the honors program.
   a. Probe – Tell me about interactions with peers.
   b. Probe – Tell me about interactions with faculty and staff.

5. Tell me about experiences that have made you feel like you matter in other parts of the university, as well as any experiences that made you feel like you did not matter at the university.
   a. Probe – Tell me about interactions with peers.
   b. Probe – Tell me about interactions with faculty and staff.

6. How has being a Student of Color in an honors program influenced your experience?
   a. Probe – Tell me about your identities outside of race.
   b. Probe – Describe how your other identities intersect with race.

7. Tell me about your experiences on campus outside of the honors program.
   a. Probe – Describe campus activities you are involved in outside of the honors program.
b. Probe – Describe student organizations you are involved in outside of the honors program.

8. Tell me about experiences with faculty members that have made you feel like you matter, as well as any experiences that have made you feel like you did not matter.

9. What advice would you give to other Students of Color considering the honors program?
   a. Probe – What are the good things about your experience?
   b. Probe – What things could be improved?

10. What is motivating you to graduate with an honors degree?
Appendix E

Consent Form

My name is Rebekah Chojnacki, and I am asking you to participate in a UT Arlington research study titled, “Lived Experiences of Students of Color in a Diverse Honors Program.” This research study is about the experiences that Students of Color have while participating in a diverse honors program. The purpose of this study is to find out what helps foster and hinder a sense of belonging for Students of Color in a diverse honors program. You can choose to participate in this research study if you are at least 18 years old and self-identify as a Student of Color who has been an honors student for at least one full semester.

Reasons why you might want to participate in this study include to share your experience as a Student of Color in a diverse honors program and to participate in an original research study, but you might not want to participate if you are uncomfortable sharing your personal experiences with a researcher. Your decision about whether to participate is entirely up to you. If you decide not to be in the study, there will not be any punishment or penalty; whatever your choice, there will be no impact on any benefits or services that you would normally receive. Even if you choose to begin the study, you can also change your mind and quit at any time without any consequences.

The research team is committed to protecting your rights and privacy as a research subject. We may publish or present the results, but your name will not be used. While absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the research team will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of your records as described here and to the extent permitted by law.
If you have questions about the study, you can contact me at rebekah.chojnacki@uta.edu. For questions about your rights or to report complaints, contact the UT Arlington Research Office at (817) 272-3723 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

_______________________________________________________________________
Rebekah Joanna Chojnacki Date

CONSENT

You are indicating your voluntary agreement as a person 18 years or older to participate by signing on the line below.

__________________________________________
NAME OF VOLUNTEER

__________________________________________
SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER
Appendix F

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What gender description would you use to describe yourself?
   A. Female
   B. Male
   C. Non-binary/other

2. What is your ethnic background (select more than one if applicable)?
   A. American Indian or Alaska Native
   B. Asian
   C. Black
   D. Hispanic/Latinx
   E. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   F. White

3. What is your academic classification?
   A. Freshman
   B. Sophomore
   C. Junior
   D. Senior

4. How old are you?
   A. 18
   B. 19
   C. 20
   D. 21
   E. 22
   F. 23-30
   G. 31+

5. Are you a transfer student?
   A. Yes
   B. No

6. Are you a first-generation college student?
   A. Yes
   B. No

7. How long have you been an honors student?
   A. 1 semester
   B. 2 semesters
   C. 3 semesters
   D. 4 semesters
   E. 5 semesters
   F. 6 semesters
   G. 7 semesters
   H. 8+ semesters