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## **An examination of the Black honors student experience at a predominantly white institution**

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# **An examination of the Black honors student experience at a predominantly white institution**

## **Abstract**

Nationwide, there are a small percentage of Black students participating in Honors Programs at the undergraduate college level. Due to the limited representation of students of color within advanced academic programs such as honors programs, the unique stories and experiences of this particular population oftentimes goes overlooked. The goal of this qualitative study is to give Black Honors students a voice and highlight their narratives. Analyzing the benefits and challenges that students of color face within their overall experience in The Honors College at Eastern Michigan University, a Predominantly White Institution can assist in knowledge regarding this population. One focus group with six self-identified African American/Black Honors students, ages 18-24, attending Eastern Michigan University was conducted. During the focus group, students were asked about their perceptions of The Honors College and the forms of support they found to be most beneficial to their academic, professional, and personal success as a student from an underrepresented racial-ethnic background. Based on the results of this study, recommendations for further research regarding Black Undergraduate Honors students and their needs for support will be suggested.

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**AN EXAMINATION OF THE BLACK HONORS STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT A  
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION**

By

Brandie Bentley

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in Social Work

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date April 13, 2017

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### **Abstract**

Nationwide, there are a small percentage of Black students participating in Honors Programs at the undergraduate college level. Due to the limited representation of students of color within advanced academic programs such as honors programs, the unique stories and experiences of this particular population oftentimes goes overlooked. The goal of this qualitative study is to give Black Honors students a voice and highlight their narratives. Analyzing the benefits and challenges that students of color face within their overall experience in The Honors College at Eastern Michigan University, a Predominantly White Institution can assist in knowledge regarding this population. One focus group with six self-identified African American/Black Honors students, ages 18-24, attending Eastern Michigan University was conducted. During the focus group, students were asked about their perceptions of The Honors College and the forms of support they found to be most beneficial to their academic, professional, and personal success as a student from an underrepresented racial-ethnic background. Based on the results of this study, recommendations for further research regarding Black Undergraduate Honors students and their needs for support will be suggested.

*Keywords: Black students, Honors College, undergraduate, predominantly White institutions, advanced academic programs*

## **Introduction**

It is acknowledged that the terms African American and Black hold varied personal meanings and are not mutually exclusive descriptors used by people of color. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I will be using the term Black as a cultural identifier. Entering college, the racial and social climate on Eastern Michigan University's (EMU) campus was very new for me. I grew up in a racially diverse environment where matriculating to college and pursuing higher education was strongly encouraged. Not fully recognizing that it was not the norm for students of color to participate in advanced academic programs, when I entered the Honors College at the collegiate level, I experienced a huge culture shock due to the limited representation of students of color. This affected my transition into college, and I was not confident in my sense of belonging at EMU. Not having a strong sense of belonging affected my social, academic, and personal life and it created a miserable start to my collegiate experience. For the first time in my young adult life, my identity as a Black woman was challenged at all levels and I was directly confronted with the destructive effects of institutionalized injustice.

As I grappled with being a Black woman at a predominantly White institution (PWI), I sought out leadership opportunities that allowed me to support myself and others who had shared experiences. Working as an EMU Honors College Student Fellow Recruiter, my job was to encourage all students to become involved with The Honors College and gain access to the numerous benefits The Honors College has to offer. At the time my position began, the overall reported Black graduate population of The Honors College was identified as less than 8%. Black students commonly expressed their concerns with the lack of diversity and through personal experiences, I was able to relate easily. As a result, I was empowered to make a change. Through

my role in The Honors College, I established the Black Honors Student Organization (BHSO) in Fall 2015. The BHSO is a student-led organization that works to support Black students within The Honors College academically, socially, and professionally. I understood the struggle associated with owning the dual identities of being both Black and an academic, as society, seems to reinforce the idea that Black students are “too smart to be Black”, and “too Black to be smart”. It was hard to find a place that allowed me to express both identities and feel supported in doing so. By establishing the BHSO, I was able to bridge that gap and create an environment that encourages students proudly and comfortably to own who they are.

In addition to establishing an environment where Black students can feel a sense of belonging, the BHSO also has the goals of spreading cultural awareness and allowing all students the opportunity to think critically and see how systematic issues impact others (The Honors College, 2017). Since the organization’s inception, we have hosted a number of social programs, educational panels, and community engagement activities specifically focused on the needs of our Black students. The BHSO works to promote the message that the Honors College acknowledges the importance of diversity and fully supports students of color in creating a diverse and inclusive space. During the events and programs hosted, we not only cover topics that are unique to the Black Honors student population, but we also offer all honors students the opportunity to become more culturally immersed by connecting to students from various backgrounds. Over the two-year period I led the organization, I have been able to observe the positive impact the organization has had on the Black Honors student population as well as the larger honors Community. It became evident that a counter-space established for Black students within The Honors College at EMU was imperative to the overall success and retention of students of color.

As a result of personal experiences, communications with peers, and extensive research, my interest in conducting research on the Black Honors student experience at a PWI was sparked. It highlights Black Honors students' experiences at PWIs, their identified needs for support, how social identity impacts sense of belonging, and recruitment and retention. It is my hope that this information will be used to inform The Honors College at EMU, and share the oftentimes overlooked experiences of this specific population.

### **Literature Review**

Feagin & Sikes (1995) acknowledge that research focused on the experiences of Black students attending PWIs have relied heavily on quantitative measures such as enrollment numbers, graduation rates, and grade point averages, and they suggest,

“...a deeper examination of the experiences of Black students in these places requires something more than numbers gathered in school records and surveys or in classroom testing. We need to listen closely to what Black American students tell us about what happens to them and how they feel, act, and think.” (p. 91)

The first step in better understanding the experiences of Black Honors students is to begin by recognizing the challenges they face and their unique needs for support.

### **Identified Needs for Support**

Black students, both honors and non-honors, attending PWIs face a myriad of difficulties and issues daily, including racism, cultural alienation and isolation, culturally insensitive students and staff, lack of Black faculty, limited and decreasing economic assistance, and

negative attitudes and stereotypes (Fleming, 1985; Hopson, 1991; Johnson, 1993; Benton 2001). In addition to the typical adjustment issues commonly faced by undergraduate college students, Black students must also combat culturally specific challenges they encounter. Smedley, Myers, & Harrell (1993), define these cultural challenges as “minority status stresses” (p.435), which includes, but are not limited to, having the legitimacy of one's presence on campus questioned, being the target of racist acts, and feeling pressured to prove one's cultural identity to same-race peers. This collection of challenges serves as an additional set of obstacles that inhibits the professional, academic, and social growth of Black students.

In a study conducted by Fries- Britt (1998), Black students in a high profile Honors program expressed feeling excluded by both Black and White students at the university. White students were found to doubt Black students' abilities and claimed that they received opportunities only because they were Black, and Black students believed the Black high achievers thought that they were better than everyone else. Not only do Black Honors students at PWIs face discrimination and racism from their White peers, but they also face rejection within the Black community because intelligence and high academic achievement is associated with the idea of “Whiteness”. Fries-Britt & Griffin (2007) share that it appears to be typical for Black Honors students to have limited opportunities to make social connections with others with similar experiences. This lack of ability to make connections with other individuals on campus can be extremely isolating and further enforce the negative experiences of high achieving Black students at PWIs.

Fries-Britt & Griffin (2007) believe the sum of these negative experiences, “... are debilitating to students because they undermine their confidence, heighten their concerns over

their academic preparedness for college, and limit their ability to bond to the university.” (p. 510). With Black students continuing to matriculate into institutions of higher education it is necessary to begin better understanding their personal experiences and specific needs for support. Harrison- Cook (1999) asserts because there is Black student representation within Honors Programs at PWIs, programs must take action to address the concerns of this particular population if they hope to increase and retain the number of Black students in the student body.

### **Black Honors Student Motivation**

In addition to understanding the challenges Black Honors students face, another essential component of this conversation is to examine what motives Black students to participate in Honors Programs. Harrison-Cook (1999) conducted a study that not only examined the reasons for low Black student participation with Honors Programs at PWIs, but also suggested ways to increase Honors Program involvement among academically talented students of color. The researcher conducted a survey at five PWIs, in which two survey samples, “Sample A” and “Sample B,” were interviewed. Sample A included 51 Black students enrolled in Honors Programs at PWIs during the 1997-1998 academic year. Sample B included Black students who also attended one of the five PWIs during the 1997-1998 academic year, and were academically qualified to participate in an Honors Program, but were not enrolled in an Honors Program. The results of the study determined that Black non-honors students’ decision not to participate in honors education was influenced by a belief that honors education appealed mostly to White students, a fear of endangering their financial aid due to a drop in their grades, and the desire for monetary incentives (Harrison-Cook, 1999).

Harrison-Cook (1999) also found that neither sample indicated feeling uncomfortable as

a minority student in a class, as a low Black student population did not discourage majority of Black non-honors students from participating in Honors Programs. Further recommendations for recruiting and retaining Black students included establishing stronger support systems specifically targeted to students of color, addressing concerns of racism, investigating the potential of offering additional financial assistance, and more effectively administering Honors Program information to Black students.

This study supports the idea that Black students enrolled in an Honors Program at a PWI have a need for greater support systems including, socially, academically, and financially. Harrison-Cook (1999) stated that it is important for Honors Programs at PWIs to show sincerity and interest in the concerns of Black students in order to become more appealing to the minority population. Intentionally providing students with the needed resources and support can result in a Black student's motivation to enroll and remain in an Honors Program.

Marsh, Chaney, & Jones (2012) analyzed narratives of high-achieving students attending an honors science and math academy (SAMA) and explored how young Black students utilize establishing relationships with other students of color through participating in social clubs to remain resilient in a racially diverse academic setting. They assert that social clubs contribute to the upward mobility of Black men and women as it provides a network of support and resources to individuals facing constant challenges of survival and resiliency. Student-organized social clubs that work to affirm racial, gender, religious and social identification of Black students showed how students utilized networking into their daily navigation through a racially diverse honors science and math academy (Marsh, Chaney, & Jones, 2012). SAMA provided students with the opportunity to participate in a variety of social clubs, many focusing on racial and ethnic

affirmation. By establishing social clubs that reaffirm certain aspects of the Black culture and identity, students affirm racial solidarity and maintain high achiever status (Marsh, Chaney, & Jones, 2012). The study concluded that the sight of other Black students motivated the participants to feel more confident in their ability to succeed.

The information presented by Marsh, Chaney, & Jones (2012) supports the idea that establishing relationships between other students of color works as a benefit to the overall success and confidence of Black Honors students. When connected with other Black Honors students, students are positively encouraged and motivated. Working to design support systems within Honors Programs at PWIs that allows Black students to connect with one another can result in a larger retention rate and overall success of Honors student of color.

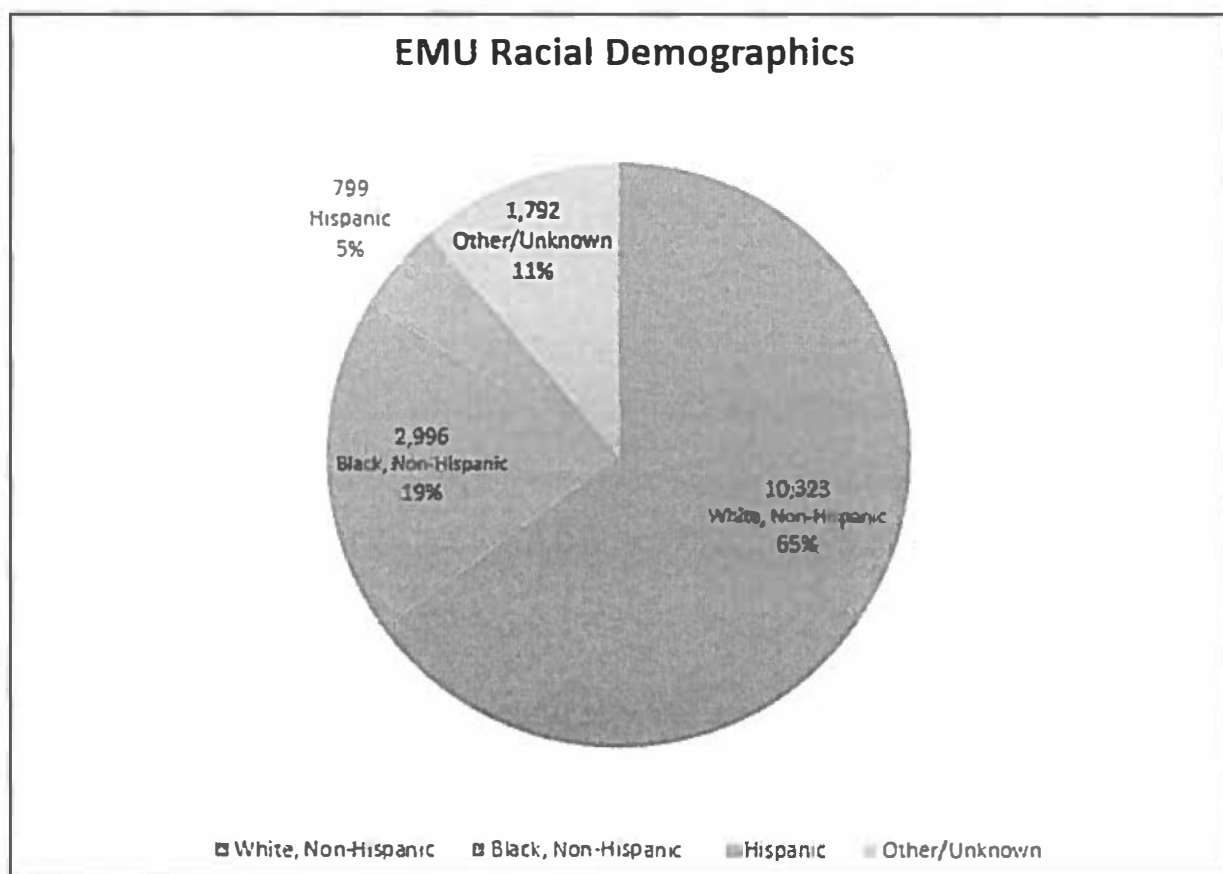
### **The Honors College at Eastern Michigan University**

The Honors College at Eastern Michigan University is located in Ypsilanti, MI. The Honors College at EMU was established in 1984 with the goal of recruiting, retaining, and rewarding academically talented students. Since its formation, it has served a large community of undergraduate students, and it continues to provide individuals with numerous benefits that work to contribute to student success.

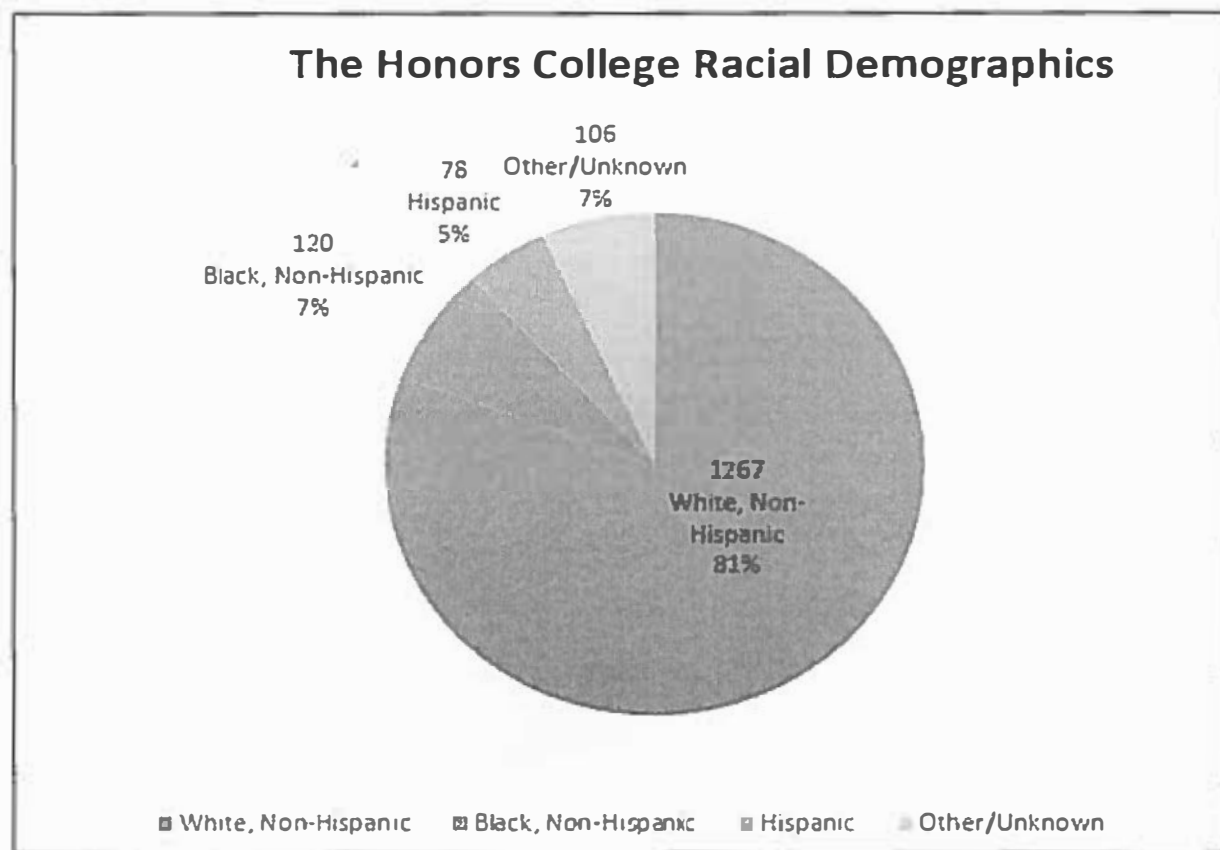
Over the years, The Honors College community has grown immensely and today, it is home to over 1,500 students. The qualifying measures for students who are eligible to become members of The Honors College at EMU vary depending on the number of college level semesters a student has completed. For students who have finished at least one semester in college, an overall 3.50, or higher, college GPA is required. For first year college students

straight from high school, a 3.50 high school GPA, 25 ACT score and/ or 1200 SAT are the minimum qualifying requirements.

In an effort to contextualize the experiences of Black Honors Students at EMU, two graphs are included below. Figure 1 displays the EMU racial demographics; while Figure 2 displays the racial demographics of The Honors College. The data for each graph are the most recent numbers that have been made available and are representative of student enrollment for the Winter 2017 semester. The “Other/Unknown” category encompasses the following racial identities: American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander, Nonresident Alien, Race/Ethnicity Unknown, and Two or More Races.



**Figure 1.** Racial demographics of the Eastern Michigan University undergraduate student body population, Winter 2017 (Eastern Michigan University Institutional Research and Information Management, 2017)



**Figure 2.** Racial demographics of The Honors College at Eastern Michigan University undergraduate student body population, Winter 2017 (The Honors College at Eastern Michigan University, 2017)

As displayed by the pie chart in Figure 1, Eastern Michigan University is a Predominantly White Institution, as 65% of the enrolled undergraduate student population identified as White in Winter 2017. While the Black population in the greater university setting is 19% of the entire student body, Black students only represent 7% of The Honors College Community, as displayed in Figure 2. The representation of Black students within The Honors College is much more limited, in comparison to that of the larger college population. This disparity within representation may result in the creation of incongruent experiences of Black students at the University.

The literature review examines the reasons suggested for low participation of Black students within Honors Programs and potential solutions to increase diversity and improve recruitment and retention efforts. In an effort to further examine the underlying reasons regarding participation of Black students in Honors Programs, this study explores the unique experiences of Black Honors students at EMU.

## **Methodology**

### **Recruitment Procedure**

A research proposal and supporting documents were submitted to the Eastern Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB) in December 2016 in order to receive approval to conduct this study. Participant recruitment proceeded after receiving IRB approval (Appendix A) in January 2017. Participants were recruited via email communication sent to both The Honors College and the Black Honors Student Organization list-serves in February 2017 (Appendix B). The email script included a brief description of my study's goals, details regarding the focus group process, and qualifying demographics for study participants including, age, racial identification, and membership within The Honors College. Interested participants responded to the initial email and I followed up with an additional email that included the time, date, and location of the study (Appendix C). As an incentive for participating in the study, participants received \$20.00.

### **Participants**

In order to analyze the experiences of self-identified African American/Black Honors students attending Eastern Michigan University, I conducted one focus group with six students.

Participants' ages ranged from 18-24 years. Three students identified as African American, two students as Black, and one as Black/African American. Of the six participants in the sample, five were women, and one was a man, which is consistent with the present gender representation in the overall Honors College population. As determined by the number of completed credit hours, the sample included two sophomores, one junior, and three seniors. Additionally, all of the participants had been active members of The Honors College for at least two semesters.

### **Data Collection**

After receiving informed consent from each participant, I lead one two-hour focus group session. Demographic information was collected that included the participants' ages, racial identification, and class standing (Appendix D). Participants were asked a series of seven questions that evaluated their experiences as Black Honors Students at Eastern Michigan University (Appendix E). The questions focused on assessing the participants' thoughts regarding the strengths and weaknesses of The Honors College at Eastern Michigan University, their personal experiences as Honors students of color, as well as their opinions regarding diversity and outreach within The Honors College.

### **Analysis**

The participants' responses during the focus group were audio recorded and transcribed. Post interview transcription, I conducted a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis followed by a thematic analysis. According to Pickton & Wright (1998), the SWOT framework is regarded as an analytical tool that can be used to categorize significant internal and environmental factors that significantly affect organizations. By utilizing an analysis

method influenced by the SWOT framework, I was able to develop a comprehensive overview of the Black Honors student experience at EMU, including both internal and external influencing factors. To begin my analysis, I first read the focus group transcript, conducted a SWOT analysis, and categorized participants' responses into the four categories, which are discussed in the findings section of this thesis.

Findings from the SWOT analysis were used to inform the thematic analysis, which is a method to analyze qualitative data whereby the data is coded and aggregated into common ideas, or themes (Creswell, 2013). During my second review, I coded the data and identified final themes based upon code.

### **Findings**

Findings from the SWOT analysis were broken into the following four categories: 1. internal strengths, the positive benefits personally experienced by Black Honors students. 2. internal weaknesses, personal barriers faced by the participants' that negatively affect their overall experience; 3. external strengths, opportunities The Honors College has to better support Black Honors students; and 4. external threats, the negative aspects of the Black Honors student experience that stem from the larger Honors College institution. The findings of the SWOT Analysis are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1.** SWOT Analysis

	Positive	Negative
	Strengths	Weaknesses
<b>Internal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peers relate intelligence to being Black</li> <li>• Social connections</li> <li>• Relationship building</li> <li>• Meeting like-minded individuals</li> <li>• Networking</li> <li>• Motivating friends to join The Honors College</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited interactions with Black peers and professionals in the Honors Community</li> <li>• Disconnect within community</li> <li>• Feelings of being an “outsider”</li> <li>• Microaggressions</li> <li>• Difference in experience in comparison to White peers</li> </ul>
	Opportunities	Threats
<b>External</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White peers supporting diversity and inclusion efforts</li> <li>• Increasing Honors presence in predominantly Black spaces</li> <li>• Providing diversity training and increasing cultural competence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited information made available in Black spaces</li> <li>• Lack of representation at events</li> <li>• Does not attract the interest of Black students</li> </ul>

A number of important topics were illuminated during the focus group session. The five most relevant and striking themes that emerged during the data analysis were as follows: (1) false sense of community, (2) limited representation, (3) racial microaggressions, (4) a need for diversity training and cultural competence within the Honors College community, and (5) The Honors College’s inability to support Black students’ needs. I have synthesized a brief overview of my themes and the concepts that constructed them in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Focus Group Thematic Analysis- Final Themes

Themes	Concepts
<b>False sense of Community</b>	Black students experiencing disconnect within Honors Community; Marketed to appeal to White students; Programming ; Feelings of being an outsider; Different experiences from White peers; Honors Residence Halls, classrooms, and work environment
<b>Limited Representation</b>	There is limited representation of Black students, staff, administration and Student Fellows; Lack of information made available in predominantly Black spaces
<b>Racial Microaggressions</b>	Stereotypes; Racism; Discrimination; White students lack awareness of how to navigate interracial communication
<b>A Need for Diversity Training and Cultural Competence</b>	Staff and Student populations; Stereotypes; Discrimination; White students not pushed outside of comfort zone
<b>The Honors College's inability to support Black students' needs</b>	Addressing larger societal issues impacting the Black population; Lack of resources; Desire to enact change
<b>False Sense of Community</b>	

At EMU, The Honors College community encompasses the Honors Residence Halls, Honors programming, Honors classes, and the physical Honors College building where many of the logistical operations occur. A shared response from many of the participants is that they encounter feelings of discomfort and isolation as underrepresented students in the Honors community. In feeling these negative emotions, the students are able to contrast their experiences with their White counterparts, and examine how their experiences within the Honors community are not consistent. As stated by Student 3:

“...the community just doesn’t feel very welcoming to African Americans. I stayed in the Honors dorms last year and it was not comfortable. I had to move as soon as I could because I couldn’t live there. But then I would see everybody else smiling and saying ‘Downing is the best place ever’ and I just never felt that and I think it was because of race.”

In addition to experiencing challenges within the Honors Residence Halls, students also share feelings of disconnect with Honors programming and activities. Illustrating this idea, Student 2 shares:

“A lot of the stuff marketed as far as community and involvement is a really special community that Honors has established...I just feel like a lot of the community that they’ve established kind of reinforces our underrepresentation. I’ve never been a board game player or a book club person. I’ve just never been that individual and that is all they do. I have never been asked once to play dominoes...spades... why is this?”

### **Limited Representation**

With Black students representing less than 10% of the overall Honors College population, students oftentimes are one of very few non-White students within various Honors spaces. This lack of representation can be taxing to students and it becomes a frustrating reality of their undergraduate experience. Student 3 shared how this reality has affected not only their personal emotions, but also their efforts in encouraging their non-Honors Black peers to join The Honors College as well:

“When you walk into a classroom and you know that you’re the only Black student and

no one acknowledges you, not even the professor, it doesn't feel good. And when you tell people about that experience, then it's like 'Uhhh, maybe I shouldn't join The Honors College, maybe it's not for me.'"

Participants also felt as if information is not being shared appropriately when it comes to recruitment efforts. Student 1 discusses their personal story of how they became a member of The Honors College and the need for increased information to be made easily accessible within spaces that are predominantly Black:

"There is a lack of information put out to where predominantly Black students are. I joined The Honors College when I was a sophomore because of my roommate. She was Black, and she was in The Honors College and she joined straight from high school...that's how I found out about it, and she introduced me to it, but I didn't hear anything about it. If we didn't live together, I wouldn't have known anything about it. My other Black friend who is in my accounting class, didn't know about [The Honors College] and I'm the one who told her about it, so unless another Black student tells me about it, or if I am friends with a White student who is in The Honors College and I hear about it, I would have never known about it, and that was just in the First Year Center. There were never any Honors College events. There were never any fliers put out. There was never anything, anything...in my classes, nothing at the College Of Business, so it's just like there was never any foot out to reach me, I have to reach them."

Once Black students find out about The Honors College and make the decision to join, not only are they underrepresented within classes, but they also encounter issues with limited representation of Black administrators and staff. Student 2 shared their feelings towards The

Honors College having limited diversity among the staff and administration:

“I just feel like not having the representation there is a put off as well. Whenever you have to sit down and have a meeting with your advisor, or manager, whoever, there are certain topics you can’t feel comfortable talking about with them because they don’t relate in that they don’t come from the same background. They’re just naïve to it and I think an effort should be put forth there too so at least we have one administrator, or some administrators, that come from diverse backgrounds.”

An additional area of concern for the participants is the lack of racially diverse students hired as Student Fellows. The Student Fellow program in The Honors College at EMU, is an internship opportunity extended to undergraduate Honors Students. In this role, students work collaboratively with staff and administration on a variety of programs and initiatives set out to meet the goals of The Honors College. This is a highly esteemed position, and students who hold Student Fellowships are typically very involved in The Honors College community and oftentimes are the faces of The Honors College as they represent the program in various avenues. Student 4 expressed their thoughts towards the lack of people of color selected as Student Fellows:

“After coming into Honors not too long ago and only seeing like maybe...three Black student fellows, it’s really discouraging. It’s not a great feeling to know that not only are you not represented in the students they’ve chosen to help run Honors, but you also don’t see any Black students around you so...it’s pretty sad.”

Student 2 also shared their thoughts and their inability to relate with the students who are hired

as Student Fellows:

“I think there has to be a commitment made to hiring more Black Student Fellows, just workers in general...I feel like a lot of the Student Fellows are Caucasian. We have a lot of Presidential Scholars and they’ve just been handed a lot to them in their lives. I can honestly look at a lot of them and say I can’t relate to you at all because me as a Black student, I’ve had to work hard to get to where I’m at and I just think there has to be a commitment to hiring [students of color].”

### **Racial Microaggressions**

Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso (2000) define microaggressions as “...subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously.” (p. 60). Microaggressive behaviors are frequently displayed towards Black Honors students and it is a challenge that presents itself in a variety of ways. Student 2 discusses their experience with micoraggressions within the office one day:

“I remember one instance I was working in the office and another one of my coworkers came up to me and I was listening to country music. He came up to me and was like “Oh, I didn’t take you as a country music person!” and if anybody knows me personally, I was raised in the middle of nowhere. I’m more country than like a lot of White people.

**\*\*laughs\*\*** Really though, I don’t know, just little micoraggressions where it’s just like ughhhhh. I just, I really don’t like to interact with Honors students.”

Student 4 elaborated on their experiences with micoraggressions in the Honors Community and the effect it has on their experience as an Honors student:

“After having multiple altercations with students...one saying the “n” word, other students just saying totally crazy off the wall racist things, their constant excuse is ‘Oh well, I wasn’t raised around Black people, I was raised in a predominantly White community and I just don’t know about these issues.’ That, I feel like isn’t necessarily Honors fault, but they should be doing something about it so that Black students don’t feel like they don’t feel comfortable in the Honors community. White students are making these comments that are blatantly disrespectful, and it’s a turn off...it’s a real turn off and it makes me not want to come to Honors anymore. It makes me not want to interact with those students and it makes me have animosity towards those students, and if I were to show that, it makes me the bad guy because nobody cares.”

### **Need for Diversity Training and Cultural Competence**

Participants identified a need for diversity and cultural competency training within the Honors Community. Student 6 shared taking a class focused on the experiences of people of color and the impact it had among their White peers:

“It should be enforced for the Honors as a whole or just the University as a whole too, to take classes that will inform them about diversity issues. I took a... it was an Honors Course, it was Racial and Cultural Minorities, and the White people that were in my class were like ‘I never heard of this...’ and you have to keep learning about it or else you’ll just keep being ignorant.”

Student 1 went on to explain an interaction they had with incoming Honors students’ parents when they gave a presentation about the Black Honors Student Organization:

“I was trying to get all the other kids to come and talk about it to just let them know that you don’t have to be Black to see it, to come and participate and they were very taken aback by it because it said Black, which was annoying. And then the parents would come and the parents were more open to talk and they said their kid is coming and their kid is not racist, but they’ve never seen a Black person, so they have racist tendencies so then they’re like, ‘Do you guys have diversity training or is there some type of program for students who come here who are not used to being in a diverse environment?’ So I think if The Honors College addresses that, people would be open to it. If they made it seem more of a priority, not just a passing thing, people would actually be open to it and learn more, but it’s not pushed as hard as it should be.”

Student 2 thinks that providing some form of cultural competency training would be extremely beneficial because some students are just unaware:

“I just feel like there’s an awful lot of Honors students that legitimately don’t even know how to talk to like a Black person ... just so unaware of how to conduct themselves.”

Student 4 further discusses the importance of diversity and inclusion training:

“I feel like diversity and inclusion training should definitely be a real thing, especially when you have so many students coming back to that comment, ‘I wasn’t raised around Black people, but...’ and then they say something ignorant. That’s hurtful, that’s annoying.”

**Inability to Support Black Students' Needs**

Lastly, participants have found The Honors College to lack the resources needed to support Black students appropriately. Student 1 shared their frustration with The Honors College because they seem to ignore many social issues that impact the Black student population:

“[The Honors College] puts on the front that we’re diversified, but if you want to talk about that racist graffiti that happened on campus, they were literally forced to acknowledge that it ever happened. That in itself shows how it’s not personal for them, it’s not happening in their lives, or part of their identity so it’s not a priority unless [Black Honors students] make them see it as a priority, which I feel like that’s more detrimental to the Black students because we do the same thing as the White students, but we have to fight to be seen. That’s not supportive at all.”

Student 4 states that although there are clear issues that need to be directly addressed, they believe The Honors College would like to make a change, but lacks the resources and tools needed to properly enact that change:

“I do feel like they want to make a change, but they don’t know how to do it. And it’s just like facilitating that communication and making everyone feel comfortable with saying how they feel, instead of saying well we don’t do that or you know we really do care. Well if you did and everyone felt that way, it wouldn’t be a problem. So it’s having that conversation and everyone being really transparent on how they feel. But yeah it needs to change, it’s ridiculous.”

### **Discussion**

The five themes highlighted within the focus group session work to illuminate the unique experiences of Black Honors students attending a PWI. The study data supports the idea that The Honors College can begin to better support Black students by promoting the development of a community that endorses cultural competency and reflects the interests and identities of Black students.

As shared by the participants, Black Honors students experience feelings of disconnect within the established Honors College community. According to Fries-Britt & Turner (2001), developing a strong sense of community is vital to the success of Black students attending PWIs. Research has confirmed, due to the hostile and isolating nature of Predominantly White Institutions, Black students with a strong sense of community support and involvement may be more resourceful and assertive in coping with being a minority on campus (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). Further endorsing this idea, Allen (1992) found that humans develop best in surroundings where they are valued, feel safe and accepted, and have social networks. In combining these notions, it becomes evident that Black student success at a PWI is influenced by students' perceived sense of community connections and support. A community includes the environment where students are employed, study, socialize, live, and connect with others. At this current state, Black Honors students have limited connections with other Black Honors peers and Black Honors Faculty and Staff members. This absence of relation with others who can relate to them culturally affects Black students' perceived sense of community and leaves them with feelings of being an outsider.

As supported by the research presented in my literature review, Black Honors students

attending a PWI consistently face racism and discrimination within their social and academic environments. Microaggressions are a common challenge encountered by participants in the study. Solorzano et. al (2000) assert that present microaggressions within academic and social spaces can lead Black students to experience feelings of isolation, frustration, and self-doubt. Whether it is having one's academic abilities questioned due to perceived racial stereotypes or listening to other Honors peers use racist and discriminatory language, this is a frustrating challenge to overcome because it is present within various settings. As shared by a participant in the study, it is believed that the use of microaggressions and other discriminatory language and actions result from a lack of understanding and cultural awareness among White Honors students.

The level of cultural competency displayed by Honors students and staff is an additional influencing factor that impacts the Black Honors student experience. As stated by Terrell (1988), "Colleges and universities need to promote recognition, understanding, and appreciation of other cultures through student, faculty and staff programs that highlight cultural diversity issues" (p.83). By recognizing and addressing relevant cultural issues that impact this population and providing education and awareness, The Honors College can use their position to help inform non-Black students and staff members of appropriate cultural interactions and increase cultural sensitivity.

The goal of this research was to identify and address a few aspects of the Black Honors student experience at a Predominantly White Institution. Through the five identified themes, (1) false sense of community, (2) limited representation, (3) racial microaggressions, (4) a need for diversity training and cultural competence within the Honors College community, and (5) The

Honors College's inability to support Black students' needs, a better understanding of the Black Honors Student experience is gained. Aligning with the aforementioned beliefs of Feagin & Sikes (1995), through the use of qualitative data, the unique stories of this particular population have been further explored and recognized as students were granted the opportunity to share how they feel, act, and think. Although only a small number of stories were addressed within this study, it is my hope that this can inspire additional support and research to be initiated.

### **Limitations**

A major limitation of this study is that there were a small number of participants. It is recognized that the identities of Black Honors students are multifaceted and all experiences may not align with the stories and experiences shared by the six participants involved in this study. As a result, the identified themes and recommendations presented may not be generalized to other institutions and Honors Programs across the country. Geographic location must be considered, and the impact of the current racial climate at different universities should be evaluated. Additionally, this study was not a multi-year analysis. The experiences of students may vary depending on their class standing and the time in which their experiences were analyzed.

### **Recommendations**

Many of the challenges faced by Black Honors students stem from larger deeply rooted systemic problems present within the greater society. Allen (1992) further asserts, that any attempt to address the challenges faces by Black students at PWIs without considering the broader context of issues confronting Black people as an oppressed and marginalized minority in

America is doomed to fail, because the experiences of Black students in higher education are in part products of larger systemic issues. For example, challenges with racism, discrimination, and microaggressions are present within various institutional and social structures. The Honors College is embedded in an institution that does not have the necessary resources and tools needed to fully support the needs of Black students. As stated by D'Augelli & Hershberger (1993), for PWIs to realistically provide education and service to the entire student population, a commitment to diversity must come from the highest administrator. The Honors College does not serve as the highest level of administration at EMU, and to bring about institutional change, the University as a whole must recognize and address the challenges faced by our underrepresented students. While it is essential to acknowledge and evaluate the effects of oppression within the greater context, it is also equally as important to understand how we as individuals can begin to bring about change by attacking these issues on smaller levels and using personal power and privilege to advocate for marginalized groups.

Benton (2001) shares one of the major challenges for Black students attending a PWI is the campus environment because PWIs are failing in their attempts to provide Black students with an environment that consistently promotes their value. This researcher describes the experience as such:

“Some African American students believe they are getting a cruise boat with all the fixings because PWIs imply they have many black students or substantial services for students of color. However, when black students step foot on predominantly white campuses, they get a tiny tugboat, like black student services being located in an obscure place and very few black students in attendance. Because PWIs possess the ability to

empower individuals through education, the people they employ must recognize they have the power to facilitate or frustrate student success. With that in mind, PWIs need to consciously reevaluate the campus environment in which students learn and grow.”

(p.25)

In order to begin transforming the current environment and consistently promoting the value of Black Honors students, The Honors College can work to promote classes, seminars, and workshops that unpack diversity and inclusion for non-students of color and help them to enhance self-awareness and recognize personal privilege. As highlighted by students who participated in the focus group, interactions with White students who are unaware of how to interrelate with individuals from diverse backgrounds are frequent. This is supported by a study conducted by Saddlemire (1996) where findings showed that while White college students had little or no contact with students of color, they still possessed negative assumptions about Black students and Black culture. Resulting from limited interactions and education, White students' lack of understanding of how to engage in interracial communications leads them to attribute negative characteristics to Black students through the use of hurtful racial microaggressions and stereotypes.

Education enhancing the understanding of race and culture should begin during the onset of students' college experiences and be continuously reinforced throughout their undergraduate studies. By encouraging these difficult discussions, presenting information regarding integral racial movements such as Black Lives Matter, and providing comprehensive resources and support, it enforces The Honors Colleges' stance on prioritizing diversity and inclusion and creating safe space in which all students can feel welcomed and supported.

Whittaker & Akers (2009) assert that an effective and balanced diversity program must,

among other things, include openly embracing inclusion of all groups in recruitment and programmatic development. The Honors College must expand their recruitment efforts. As mentioned during the focus group session, the presence of information about The Honors College in spaces where larger populations of Black students reside is sparse. An increased effort to intentionally market to students of color by simply placing posters and information within predominantly Black Residence Halls and even being present at non-Honors Orientation can improve efforts. By making information more easily accessible, students can have an increased awareness of available opportunities on campus, and their likelihood to join Honors may increase.

The Honors College can also enhance support for Black Honors students by better reflecting the identities and interest of all students through programming and events. There must be an effort made to address the interests of all Honors Students. Even a simple change, such as having games like Spades, or Dominoes that students of color enjoy playing, present at game night can make a world of difference. When students feel their voices and identities are incorporated, they are more motivated to participate and encourage the others to do the same. By reflecting their interests, it conveys the message that all students are valued and accepted within The Honors College environment. This concept is endorsed by Fries-Britt & Turner (2002), who state that when Black students are in an environment where the culture, activities, and people reflect what they value and who they are, it increases their desire and ability to be involved and engaged in the community.

Davis (1991) states Black support networks are instrumental factors that influence Black student college satisfaction and academic success. For this reason, it is essential for The Honors College to increase the presence of Black staff, faculty, students, and Student Fellows. With

limited representation of individuals of color among The Honors College's student and staff populations, it becomes a difficult task for students to build their social support networks and identify individuals they can count on to provide culturally relevant support and assistance. Black students attending PWIs look to Black faculty and staff for emotional support and guidance. In a qualitative study focused on high-achieving Black students attending PWIs conducted by Guiffida (2005), the researcher found that enhancing the cultural competence of White faculty and administrators at PWIs in addition to hiring more Black faculty and staff members to serve as mentors and role models for Black students continue to be imperative factors in improving the Black student experience. Guiffida & Douthit, (2010) also support the idea that Black students can work to build their social networks by participating in Black student organizations because,

“...participation in organizations can connect students with Black mentors and help them to find a comfortable place to socialize, connect, and be themselves with other Black students. This contact not only can begin to fill some of the void left by leaving the familiarity of home but also can help students to process feelings about identity and close relationships with people who have experienced similar feelings and have found ways of reconciling these emotions.” (p.88-89)

As shared by participants in the study, navigating the Black Honors experience can be a very isolating and challenging task. By encouraging Black Honors students to participate in pre-established organizations such as the BHSO and the Minority Achievement Retention Success (MARS) program, students can work to further develop their social networks by engaging with other Black Honors students and faculty members.

There is a suggestion for more research to be conducted on the contemporary experience of Black Honors students, as there is believed to be a shift in the overall college climate. A topic that should be further researched is the variance in the experience of individuals who are Black and participate in Honors programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

### **Conclusion**

The Honors College at Eastern Michigan University serves as an invaluable source of benefits that contribute to the social, academic, and personal success of its students. As it continues in its efforts of providing comprehensive diversity education, outreach, and support, the recruitment and retention rates of Black Honors students will improve and all students will be provided with an opportunity to increase their understanding of the challenges faced by underrepresented racial groups within The Honors College. By utilizing the information shared by Black Honors students and suggestions presented in proposed recommendations, The Honors College can make strides towards increasing support and enhancing the overall experiences of Black Honors students.

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APPENDIX A  
IRB Approval Letter

## RESEARCH @ EMU

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**UHSRC Determination:**      **EXEMPT**

**DATE:**      January 1, 2017

**TO:**      Brandie Bentley  
Department of Social Work  
Eastern Michigan University

**Re:**      UHSRC: # 742111.1  
Category: Exempt category [enter category]  
Approval Date: January 1, 2017

**Title:**      An Examination of The Black Honors Student Experience at a Predominantly White Institution

Your research project, entitled An Examination of The Black Honors Student Experience at a Predominantly White Institution, has been determined Exempt in accordance with federal regulation 45 CFR 46.102. UHSRC policy states that you, as the Principal Investigator, are responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of your research subjects and conducting your research as described in your protocol.

**Renewals:** Exempt protocols do not need to be renewed. When the project is completed, please submit the Human Subjects Study Completion Form (access through IRBNet on the UHSRC website).

**Modifications:** You may make minor changes (e.g., study staff changes, sample size changes, contact information changes, etc.) without submitting for review. However, if you plan to make changes that alter study design or any study instruments, you must submit a Human Subjects Approval Request Form and obtain approval prior to implementation. The form is available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website.

**Problems:** All major deviations from the reviewed protocol, unanticipated problems, adverse events, subject complaints, or other problems that may increase the risk to human subjects or change the category of review must be reported to the UHSRC via an Event Report form, available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website.

**Follow-up:** If your Exempt project is not completed and closed after three years, the UHSRC office will contact you regarding the status of the project.

Please use the UHSRC number listed above on any forms submitted that relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the UHSRC office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 734-487-3090 or via e-mail at [human\\_subjects@emich.edu](mailto:human_subjects@emich.edu). Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Teresa Mortier, PhD, MS, MT(ASCP)  
Chair  
College of Health and Human Services Human Subjects Review Committee

**APPENDIX B**  
**Recruitment Email**

*Hello,*

*My name is Brandie Bentley and I am an Undergraduate student working under the supervision of Dr. Yvette Colón in the School of Social Work at Eastern Michigan University. The reason that I am contacting you is that for my Honors Senior Thesis Project, I am conducting a qualitative study that examines the unique stories and experiences of African American/Black Honors students, and I am looking for individuals who are interested in sharing their experiences. I am currently seeking volunteers who self-identify as African American/Black, members of the Honors College, and between the ages of 18-21.*

*Participation in this study involves being a part of a focus group with 5-7 self-identified African American/Black Honors students. During the focus group, students will be asked about their Honors College involvement and the benefits and challenges they face that work to shape their overall experience as an Honors student of color at Eastern Michigan University. Participation in this study will take approximately 1.5 hours. In appreciation of your time commitment, you will receive light refreshments and a \$20.00 gift card. The study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Eastern Michigan University Institutional Review Board (# 742111-1).*

*However, the final decision about participation is yours.*

*The focus group will take place on **Friday, February 10, 2017 at 6:00PM.***

*If you are interested in participating, please contact me at [bbentle3@emich.edu](mailto:bbentle3@emich.edu), confirming your interest and availability to participate at the time included above. I will then send a follow-up email indicating that you have been signed up and provide you with further information concerning the location of the study. If you have to cancel your appointment, please email with at least a 48 hour or more notice, at [bbentle3@emich.edu](mailto:bbentle3@emich.edu).*

*If you have additional questions, or would like more information please email either myself at [bbentle3@emich.edu](mailto:bbentle3@emich.edu), or my Senior Thesis Advisor, Dr. Yvette Colón at [ycolon@emich.edu](mailto:ycolon@emich.edu).*

*Sincerely,*

*Brandie Bentley*

APPENDIX C  
Focus Group Detail Email

*Hello!*

*Thank you for expressing your interest in being a part of my Senior Thesis research study focused on the Experiences of Black Honors Students at a Predominantly White Institution.*

*The focus group will be taking place on this Friday, February 10, 2017 at 6:00PM in the Best Hall MPR, located on the first floor of Best Hall. Prepare for the session to conclude around 8:00PM, at the latest. Light refreshments will be served. If you do not have swipe access into the building, I have included my phone number below. You can call me on Friday, and I will let you in.*

*I am very excited about your participation and I look forward to working with you all soon!*

*If you have any questions, and or concerns, please feel free to contact either myself, or my Senior Thesis Advisor, Dr. Yvette Colon.*

*I will see you all on Friday!*

*Thank you,*

*Brandie Bentley  
[bbentle3@emich.edu](mailto:bbentle3@emich.edu)*

APPENDIX D  
Demographic Questionnaire

***Demographic Questionnaire:***

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Racial/Ethnic Identification: \_\_\_\_\_

Year in College (By Credit Hour): \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E

### Focus Group Questions

**Focus Group Questions**

1. Reflecting on your overall experience, what benefits have you experienced as an Honors Student that are connected to your racial identity?
2. Reflecting on your overall experience, what challenges have you experienced as an Honors Student that are connected to your racial identity?
3. How do you feel The Honors College supports you in regards to your racial identity?
4. What can you identify as external barriers that prevent African American/Black and other underrepresented students from participating in the Honors Program?
5. Focusing on The Honors College student population, what can/have Honors students do/done to openly promote diversity and inclusion?
6. In what ways, if any, do you feel The Honors College could improve when it comes to recruiting and retaining individuals from minority racial backgrounds?
7. Is there anything else anyone would like to share?

APPENDIX F

Informed Consent Form

### **Informed Consent Form**

The person in charge of this study is Brandie Bentley, a Social Work student at Eastern Michigan University. Throughout this form, this person will be referred to as the “investigator.” Her faculty advisor is Dr. Yvette Colón.

#### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of the undergraduate collegiate level, Black Honors student experience by exploring the impact of racial differences on the honors student experience at a Predominantly White Institution.

The Eastern Michigan University Honors College is a financial supporter of this research.

#### **What will happen if I participate in this study?**

Participation in this study involves:

Attending a focus group lasting approximately 1.5 hours. The focus group will involve up to 7 research participants and the investigator. You are asked only to use your first name in the focus group.

We would like to audio record you for this study. If you are audio recorded, it will be possible to identify you through your voice. If you agree to be audio recorded, sign the appropriate line at the bottom of this form. The audio recordings will be kept in a secure location for the duration of the study.

#### **What are the anticipated risks for participation?**

The primary risk of participation in this study is a potential loss of confidentiality. Protocol is in place to ensure participant confidentiality is maintained to the best of our abilities. Information will be kept confidential by not collecting any identifiable information and by only using first names during the focus groups. The audio recordings will be transcribed within one month of the focus group and then destroyed upon publication of the thesis. Participants' names will be coded in transcribing. The investigator will also ask participants not to tell anyone outside of the group about anything that was said during the group session. Participants also will be informed that the researcher cannot guarantee that participants will keep the discussions private.

Some of the focus group questions are personal in nature and may make you feel uncomfortable. Participants can also refuse to answer questions and decide to withdraw from the study at any time. A list of campus and community resources will be shared with participants whose discussion of potentially emotionally triggering and sensitive issues might necessitate further professional intervention and support.

#### **Are there any benefits to participating?**

You will not directly benefit from participating in this research.

Benefits to society include gaining a further understanding of the experiences of self-identified Black students participating in Honors Programs at Predominantly White Institutions.

#### **What are the alternatives to participation?**

The alternative is not to participate.

**How will my information be kept confidential?**

We will keep your information confidential by not collecting any identifiable information and only using first names during the focus group. The audio recordings will be transcribed within one month of the focus group and then destroyed following publication. Your name will be coded in transcribing the audio recordings, at which point all of your information will be anonymous. The focus group transcripts will be stored in password-protected computer files, and audio recordings will be kept in a locked filing cabinet until they are destroyed. We will make every effort to keep your research information confidential.

The investigators will ask you and the other people in the group to use only first names during the focus group session. The investigators will also ask you not to tell anyone outside of the group about anything that was said during the group session. However, we cannot guarantee that everyone will keep the discussions private.

Other groups may have access to your research information for quality control or safety purposes. These groups include the University Human Subjects Review Committee, the Office of Research Development, the sponsor of the research, or federal and state agencies that oversee the review of research. The University Human Subjects Review Committee (UHSRC) is responsible for the safety and protection of people who participate in research studies.

We may share your information with other researchers outside of Eastern Michigan University. If we share your information, we will remove any and all identifiable information so that you cannot reasonably be identified. The UHSRC has approved this study (approval number \_\_\_\_\_)

The results of this research will be shared at conferences and used to inform The Honors College. Identifiable information will not be used for these purposes.

**Storing study information for short-term use**

We would like to store your information from this study for short term use. Your information will be labeled with a code and not your name. Your information will be stored in a password-protected or locked file. Please initial below whether or not you allow us to store your information until the date of publication:

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

**Are there any costs to participation?**

Participation will not cost you anything.

**Will I be paid for participation?**

You will be given a gift card for \$20 for participating in this research study.

**Study contact information**

If you have any questions about the research, you can contact the Principal Investigator, Brandie Bentley, at [bbentle3@emich.edu](mailto:bbentle3@emich.edu) or by phone at (313) 268-3289. You can also contact Brandie's advisor, Dr. Yvette Colón at [ycolon@emich.edu](mailto:ycolon@emich.edu) or by phone at (734) 487-0921.

For questions about your rights as a research subject, contact the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee at [human.subjects@emich.edu](mailto:human.subjects@emich.edu) or by phone at (734)-487-3090.

**Voluntary participation**

Participation in this research study is your choice. You may refuse to participate at any time, even after signing this form, with no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled including your Honors College membership and EMU academic standing. If you leave the study, the information you provided will be kept confidential. You may request, in writing, that your identifiable information be destroyed. However, we cannot destroy any anonymous information that has already been published.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and am satisfied with the answers I received. I give my consent to participate in this research study regarding the impact of racial differences on the Honors student experience at a Predominantly White Institution.

**Signatures**

---

Name of Participant

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

I agree to be audio recorded for this study.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

**Investigator Obtaining Consent**

I have explained the research to the subject and answered all his/her questions. I will give a copy of the signed consent form to the subject.

---

Name of Person Obtaining Consent

---

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

---

Date